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THE COSMIC LOOTERS

by Alexander Blade



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The Editorial.....

WE had an interesting visit with one of science fiction's greatest personalities the other day. Forrest J. Ackerman stopped by on his way back to Los Angeles after attending the World Science Fiction Convention in London.

FORRY flew over via KLM airlines on a charter flight with 54 other s-f conventioneers from the USA. We rather got the impression that a minor convention in itself was held on board the plane. Apparently KLM went all out to provide a nice trip—with plenty of food and "beverages" at any and all times. By the time the American contingent reached London things were pretty well oiled for some rollicking fun.

ASIDE from the obvious social fling which any convention is built on—the successful ones—Forry didn't have too much to say about the official program. We gathered that there really wasn't much of an official program, as is customary in the USA. Fans were more or less expected to entertain themselves—and apparently they did!

WHAT indeed intrigued Forry was a "coincidental" convention he ran into in Germany after leaving the London festivities. The German fans, it seems, are going all out for s-f, and that of course is nice to hear. With plenty of beer and pretzels at his fingertips, Forry found that a difference in language was indeed no barrier. At any rate, Forry thinks German s-f fans will become more prominent from now on.

THE major piece of news he brought back from Europe was the fact that the 1958 convention site was voted to Los Angeles. By a strange coincidence Forry is the s-f main-stay in Glitter-Town, so we're convinced the shindig over the Labor Day weekend coming up will be something worthwhile attending. We tried to get an idea from him as to what hotels might possibly be considered in LA; however it was too early for him to suggest any. But rest assured that as soon as the LA committee comes up with any news, we'll pass it right along to you.

WE did make one suggestion which we hope Forry will work on; considering the number of s-f movies Hollywood is turning out (some of them should have died aborning!) we think it would be nice if one or more of the major studios sponsored the convention. Conventions cost money—the good ones. And Hollywood still has a few bucks kicking around. And fellas, think of the nice publicity you could cash in on! .....*wlh*

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THE COSMIC LOOTERS

by

Alexander Blade

Wyatt knew his situation was desperate: he couldn't stop the alien invasion, and even if he warned Earth — nobody would believe him!

DUNCAN WYATT SPRANG up, grabbed his gun and started toward the door before he had his eyes properly open. His ears were ringing with the explosive roar that had awakened him and the pre-fab shack still quivered in the shock wave.

He thought the Third World War had started.

He crouched in the doorway and peered out onto the mesa. The unorthodox shape of the experimental ultra-tight-beam transmitter loomed over him, black against the star-blazing New Mexican sky, bearing a red star of its own to warn low-flying planes. He was all alone here. His partner, Bannister, had flown out to the Coast to oversee the making of new components for a projected improvement in design. Wyatt had never felt lonely before, even in the total solitude of the mesa top with nothing around it but the vast impersonals of sky and desert, sun and wind. Now he did feel lonely, and scared. He wondered where the bomb had dropped.

He couldn't see anything, so he went out and around the corner of the shack, keeping low and sticking tight to the wall.

Now he could see a larger area of the mesa, softly but almost adequately lighted by the billion stars above the crystal-clear air.

He saw what it was that had fallen out of the sky.

It wasn't a bomb. It was a—plane? Call it a plane. Call it a rotary-thrust flying wing. Call it anything you want to, it was there, round and glimmering faintly against the drab rock. The boom and shock that had shaken him out of his bunk must have been the result of the thing pulling out of a steep dive at super-sonic speed.

He should have been relieved that this was so. Somehow Wyatt was not. He had a feeling. It was such a crazy feeling that he could not believe it, but he couldn't get rid of it either.

He stood still in the shadow by the corner of the shack and waited to see what would happen next.

A light came on with blinding suddenness, shining from the center of the queer plane. It showed up every pebble and stunted bush, every grain of the rock, the sun-bitten pre-fab wall, himself in his sock feet and rumpled khakis, standing stiffly with the gun in his hand.

A portion of the black outer rim of the round plane dropped down, unfolding into a stair.

Wyatt shouted, "What is it? Who are you?" His voice was thin and small in that vastness of windy air. "I have a gun," he shouted. "Come out slowly, with your hands up!"

The words sounded ridiculous even while he was saying them. But he had to put up some kind of a front, simply because he was scared. If he didn't he would have had to turn and run away.

It was the damned round queer-looking plane. He was in a cold shaking sweat waiting to see what

came out of it.

When he did see he didn't believe it.

She stood in the aperture at the top of the narrow metal stair. Her hands were raised just a little, so that he might be sure there was no weapon in them. He thought she was smiling slightly. She had black hair, black as the blackest shadow you could imagine, shorn close around her head. She was dressed in black—soft boots, close-fitting pants, wide belt with holster, severely plain shirt with a splotch of gold on the front of each shoulder. Somehow he sensed that the gold splotches were insignia, not decorations. He also sensed—from something about the way she stood, the way she looked at him, the hard, disciplined strength that underlay the splendid lines of her body—that this woman was not like any of the women he had ever known, and that probably the Third World War might have been easier to cope with.

She said, "There is no need to be afraid."

Her English sounded as though she had learned it by mathematical formula, and in a hurry.

Wyatt said untruthfully, "I'm not afraid. Just cautious." He walked out closer to the disc-shaped plane. The mesa rock was icy under his socks, the wind was icy down his back, and there was a chill inside him that was purely personal.

"Where do you come from?" he asked. "What do you want?"

SHE DROPPED her hands and came quickly down the stairs, apparently satisfied that he was not going to shoot her.

"I haven't much time," she said. Her eyes were the color of pure turquoise, startlingly bright, curiously tilted. She gave a swift glance at the sky and then spoke urgently to Wyatt.

"Try to understand, to believe. Your world is going to be attacked. Not tonight, but within a short time. I want you to take a warning to your government, so that we may be prepared when the attack comes."

"I see," said Wyatt. He had a wild desire to laugh. He saw himself going to Washington and telling various personages at the White House and the Pentagon that a beautiful girl landed in a funny round ship and told him the Earth was going to be attacked and so they should call out the armed forces to be ready.

"They'd shoot me first," he muttered, "and then throw me in a padded cell." He stepped closer to the girl. Her face was hand-

some, perfectly human and perfectly alien at one and the same time. It was not a soft face. It was used to decision and command. The red mouth, he thought, would never pout or be petulant, but it could easily be cruel. "Who's going to attack Earth? Who are you?"

She said impatiently, "It does not matter who I am, except that I'm in a position to know what I'm saying. Listen. There is a huge interstellar task force out there, working its way through this sector of the galaxy, plundering as it goes. These fringe areas are too far away from our center of power at Uryx—a star-system you never heard of here—to make permanent conquest practical, so all we are interested in is loot. Our advance scouts go far ahead of the main body. We scouts have been here before. *I've* been here before. Now I'm warning you. The main force will be at Alpha Centauri when I return to it. When it is finished there, Earth is next."

"I don't believe you," Wyatt said. But in spite of himself, he did.

He was close to the foot of the stair now, close enough almost to touch the tall, slim girl with the black hair blowing around her forehead and the brilliant, wary eyes. The strange ship loomed above them both. Wyatt looked at it and shivered and gnawed his lip.

"Why are you warning me?" he said suddenly. "You're part of the force. Why do you want to betray it?"

"I have my reasons," she said, "and they are good ones. But you wouldn't understand them. In any case, the warning is true. Don't question it."

She started to withdraw from him, up the metal steps.

"Wait," said Wyatt. "Nobody on earth would listen to me if I told them that story. They'd only think I was crazy. Listen, if you really want to have your warning taken seriously you'll have to go to Washington yourself."

"That's impossible," she said curtly.

Again she started up the steps and again he stopped her.

"No," he said, and now he knew that he must not let her get away. As wildly improbable, not to say insane. as this whole business was, she was real and her ship was real, and wiser men than he should be handed the responsibility of dealing with that reality.

"You and I together couldn't convince anybody by just talking," he said. "The only thing that could is you ship. *That* was never made on Earth and they would

know that. They could test it, examine it, prove it isn't a fake, a hoax of any kind, and that's going to be hard—you haven't any idea how hard."

HE STEPPED onto the lowest step of the stair. "You've got to fly this thing to Washington."

"I told you that's impossible," she said. "I've given you the warning; you'll have to do what you can with it. Stand clear!"

She turned her back on him and sprang lightly through the aperture into the ship.

Wyatt did not stop to think. He rushed up the stair after her and it began to draw itself up as he did so, folding him under, so that he thought he was going to have to jump clear or be crushed. There was a whine of power from inside. Damn her, thought Wyatt, she doesn't care if she kills me. He scrambled frantically up the tilting, flattening rungs and caught the edge of the aperture and kicked himself forward through it.

The panel that was sliding in to seal the opening caught him halfway and held him in an agonizing grip. He cried out with pain and the fear of being cut in two. He could see into the round cockpit now, with the black-uniformed woman stopped in the act of sitting down at the controls, her startled face turned toward him.

Then her expression became one of intense annoyance. Her hand moved toward the weapon holstered at her waist. In the same instant a warning bell rang and the sliding panel re-opened automatically. Wyatt lurched the rest of the way through, sick and dizzy but knowing that this was no time to indulge his symptoms. He was afraid to fire the gun he still held clutched in his hand, even as a gesture of intimidation. The cockpit was small and faced in metal. A richocheting bullet could kill either or both of them, or damage the control panel so that the craft could not fly. So he threw the gun instead. It whizzed past her head close enough to touch her hair, and in the second she was busy ducking it he had crossed the tiny metal floor and grappled with her.

She did not scream or claw his face or tear at his hair or do any of the things women customarily did. She fought, and she was strong as spring steel. He held her wrist so that she could not get at the weapon in her belt, and her free fist came up under his chin and made him see stars. Then her knee got him in the pit of the belly. All Wyatt's ideas of chivalry deserted him. He let go of her wrist and gambled that he could

knock her out before she could get the weapon, whatever it was, out of its holster.

He won, but by a shamefully tiny margin. She sagged down and he snatched the weapon himself and then retrieved his gun and stood panting, feeling very shaky at the knees.

She shook her head, grunted, looked up at him with blazing eyes, and started up all ready to come back and kill him.

He pointed her own weapon and his gun at her, using both hands.

"Mine will kill," he said. "I don't know what yours will do, but you know." He motioned to the pilot's seat. "Get in there. We're flying to Washington."

She gave him a wicked little smile with the sharp edge of her teeth and did as he told her.

CHAPTER II

THERE WERE PLACES for four beside the pilot, spaced around the circular cockpit. Wyatt strapped himself into the seat nearest the girl. He imagined the take-off would be something special, and he was braced for it, but even the almost instantaneous transition from a state of sitting still on the ground to one of shooting straight up into the sky at a hell of a rate was hard to take. He jammed the gun into her back between the shoulders and said,

"Not too high. We're not going to Alpha Centauri."

"There are commercial air lanes," she said irritably, "and military air bases and radar installations, and ground-to-air missiles. Even in this ship I couldn't guarantee to elude every one of them."

Wyatt considered that, uneasily aware that his gun was now largely a bluff. He was not likely to use it on her, unless he wanted to come down a lot faster than he went up, and she would know that. He said, "All right, get up over the obstacles, but don't try anything too clever. I'm a pretty good pilot and I could gamble on flying this thing myself."

That was a flat lie, but he thought it might be worth telling.

The girl did not seem to be interested one way or another. The craft continued to go straight up, whistling shrilly as it went, and then it swerved around with surprising gentleness and headed east. Wyatt looked out the small double-sealed window beside him.

The stars blinded him. They had ceased to twinkle, and they had grown huge, and they had multiplied. The sky was no longer flat but deep and endless, so that even as countless many stars as there were did not crowd it. Far below there was a dark wrinkled

rind like the edge of a round cheese, and Wyatt knew that it was the Earth.

It was the most magnificent sight he had ever seen, and he wished intensely that he was not seeing it. It was the final touch of insane reality that made the whole wild nightmare consistent.

"I was just lying there minding my own business," Wyatt said bitterly, turning away from the window. "Why did you have to pick on me?"

"You were obviously a technician, and it would require a technician to grasp what I had to tell you. The others seem not to believe even when they see."

"Others?" asked Wyatt startled by a new thought.

"Of course. How do you suppose we plan our attacks? How do you suppose we learn the things we must know, including enough of the language to be able to communicate with the people after the invasion? In the normal course of events I would have considered you an especially valuable find. The accessible ones have all been herders of animals or fishermen or primitive tribesmen or poor wanderers, who could not tell us much beyond their own language and their own calling."

"You mean," said Wyatt, "that if you hadn't decided to give me the warning instead, you'd have kidnapped me? Taken me—" he nodded at the window, "—out there? Or tried to?"

"Of course."

"Well," said Wyatt. "I'll be damned."

He was enraged, and more alarmed than ever. "Don't forget for a second that I've got this gun in your back."

"I'm not likely to," she said in a curiously calm voice. "How are you called?"

He told her.

"I am Brinna Halphard—Brinna the Dark, I think you would say."

It seemed a little ridiculous to say, How do you do? Wyatt grunted uneasily and asked, "Why the sudden friendliness?"

"I'm a soldier, and I know it is impossible to win every skirmish. I've learned to make the best of things."

"That's fine." said Wyatt, not trusting her for a minute. But he was curious. "Are all women soldiers where you come from?"

"As many as wish to be. There is no difference made between the sexes, only between individuals according to their abilities. There are many women in the task force —pilots, technicians, officers, gunners, ordinary troops."

"Nobody thinks a thing of it?"

"Why should they?"

Wyatt could not really think of any good reason, except that on Earth they did.

Brinna reached for a panel at her right side and started to open it.

Instantly Wyatt was alert. "What are you doing there?"

"You want to go to Washington. Unless you can tell me the exact coordinates yourself, I must have the computer work out a course."

"Okay," said Wyatt. "Open the panel, but slowly."

Behind it there was only a remarkable compact receptor-effector unit. "You see?" she said. "Now if you will allow me—"

He allowed her. He asked, "Do you have a chart designation for Washington already in that thing?"

"For everywhere in your world," said Brinna. *"Naturally."*

A CHILL went crawling down Wyatt's back. Some of the larger implications of the situation were beginning to catch up with him.

Enemies had entered the skies of Earth, spying, charting. Enemies from another star, so far away that Earth had never heard of it. Earthmen had been kidnapped, the names of cities had been written down, plans had been made. And somewhere out there, in the immense black and fire-blazing gulf that surrounded Earth—not any longer as a protective barrier but as a pathway for invasion—an alien fleet proceeded on its way.

Wyatt stared in horror out the window and wondered how, even if all Earth's defenses were mustered, she could fight off an attack by an enemy so superior in technology that interstellar flight was a commonplace.

"Brinna," he said, "what—" He started to turn his head toward her and out of the tail of his eye he saw her hand move on the controls but it was already too late to do anything. The plane went out from under him sideways and the window tried to push itself through his head. Then he was thrown the other way with a violence that nearly snapped his neck. The seat belt cut into him and his arms flew out wildly. The gun was pulled from his hand as by a powerful magnet. He yelled involuntarily and then for the second time direction was reversed and his head slammed into the window again and all the stars went out.

When he came to he had no weapon at all and his hands were securely fastened to the back of the seat with his own belt. His head ached abominably. "That was a dirty trick," he said. "Now I

see why you made that first turn so gentle—so I wouldn't know how fast this thing could maneuver at right angles."

Brinna said, "Would you have expected me to give you a performance sheet?"

"All right," he said sourly, hating her, hating the feeling of helplessness and disadvantage, raging at the combination of circumstances that had chosen him to grapple with a situation that no one man could possibly have handled. "Where are we going now?"

"Back to where I found you. You'll have to get to Washington with the warning some other way."

Wyatt groaned. "What do I have to do to make you understand? Nobody will believe a word I say."

"It's your world," she said. "I can do no more than tell you what will happen."

"You mean you *won't* do any more," he said furiously. "What's your game, anyway? If you really cared whether Earth is attacked or not you'd make sure—"

A pair of little blue lights began to flash alternately at the left of the control panel, accompanied by a shrill buzzing.

Brinna started. She said something in her own language that sounded like a curse.

"Whats the matter?" Wyatt asked.

"Trouble. Oh, not with the ship, that's only the communicator." She put out her hand and at the same time she gave him a hard glare. "Just keep quiet. Don't say anything at all, or you may only make things worse for yourself."

She flipped a switch. The flashing and buzzing stopped and a man's face appeared in a tiny screen. Wyatt could not see it too clearly from his angle, but it seemed a not unlikeable face of which the chief characteristics were strength and a sort of inner weariness. The man spoke to Brinna and she answered him, and Wyatt could not understand a word of what they said.

Some part of the conversation seemed to concern Wyatt himself. He became more and more frantically uneasy. When the contact was broken and the screen was blank again, he leaned forward against his bonds and demanded, "What's all that about?"

Brinna nodded briefly toward the window. "Look out there." Her brows were drawn down into a black angry bar and she seemed to be thinking hard. Wyatt looked out the small window.

A SECOND DISC-SHAPED craft had joined them. It was about four hundred feet away,

keeping pace. Even while he looked at it the craft tilted, showing a glowing pink center surrounded by the black outer ring, and appeared to shoot away into the starry void.

Brinna followed it.

Wyatt said, "Hey. You said you were going to put me off on the mesa—"

She shook her head. "Not now. That's Makvern out there, the good gray Makvern who would be suspicious of his own father. He knows you're aboard. There is only one place I can take you." She pointed expressively. "Out. If I tried to drop back down to Earth now I'd be in front of a court-martial before breakfast."

She turned to face him. It seemed that she had done her thinking, compensating for the sudden change in direction that Makvern's appearance had necessitated.

"Listen," she said. "I'm the only hope you have of getting back to Earth before the attack. If you tell anyone that I tried to pass on a warning, that one hope will be gone. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," Wyatt said. He had been doing some thinking too. "I am also your only hope of getting a warning to Earth before the invasion, which you badly want to do not because you give a tinker's damn what happens to Earth, but because of the effect you think it will have on some deal of your own. So I guess in a sense we're partners, then?"

"You could say that." Her eyes were as bright and hard as two chips of blue stone. She was as handsome a girl as Wyatt had ever seen, and she scared the devil out of him. "Partners. Yes. But whatever my motives may be they do not concern you, or Earth. And if I do not succeed with my plan this time—" She shrugged. "There will be other worlds."

Wyatt said shrewdly, "They might not be as well able to fight back as Earth, though. We don't quite have space flight yet, but we do have nuclear weapons. Enough to give even your force a real jar. And that's what you want, isn't it?"

Her face changed slightly. He thought she almost smiled, in a wry unhumorous way.

"You're far too clever," she said. "Don't let your cleverness betray you."

"I'll watch it," he said, not feeling clever at all, feeling sick and agonized as the last thin rim of Earth dropped away out of sight and all of a sudden he knew that he was in space.

For one wild moment he thought, This whole thing is a dream, it happened too fast and it's all too

crazy to be real, and pretty soon I'll wake up. But he knew it was not a dream. He was here, awake and substantial, and he was a captive, going with bound hands into an unknown void.

And going fast.

CHAPTER III

IT HAD BEEN NIGHT, and suddenly it was day.

There was no twilight zone, no period of transition. The craft shot out of the Earth's shadow into the full blaze of the sun, and it was like somebody turning on all the lights in the world in the middle of a dark room.

Wyatt flinched and turned his head away. When he dared to look again there was a filter lens over the port. Actually it must have slid into place at once, or the raw glare would have blinded him. And now space seemed to be brimming over with light, all the blackness hidden beyond that golden blaze.

He could see Makvern's craft, still in position ahead and to one side, its polished rim flashing and glittering. It seemed to skim through the ocean of light like a fleeting shadow, and Wyatt found himself mesmerized by the illusion that he, too, was being buoyed up and whirled along, a chip on the floods of heaven.

Brinna hunched brooding over her controls and never gave it all a second look. Wyatt realized that of course this was an old story to her. She must have seen suns all over the galaxy and consider them no more interesting than street lamps.

It was not an old story to Wyatt. He was still frightened to death of being where he was, but even the fear was getting lost in the overwhelming wonder and magnificence of it. He craned his neck around to peer at the actual sun itself, but that was behind them and the ports on that side of the cockpit were blacked out completely. All he could see were shaking veils of fire that sprang out suddenly to cover half his field of vision and then fell back, streaming in golden streams. He thought these must be solar prominences, or part of the corona. The golden flood of light spread out and out and he could not see any end to it, though he knew there must be one. Rushing obliquely ahead of the craft was a thin black knife-edged blade cutting sharp across the radiance, and he knew that that was their own shadow.

There was the light, and Makvern's craft, and the shadow, and nothing else. Then a white curved thing like a gnawed bone slid into

view, and he knew it was the edge of the Moon.

They headed toward it. For the first time Wyatt had something by which to estimate their speed. Whatever it was in miles per hour, it was too damned fast. The Moon fairly sprang at them. He could see craters opening and weird jagged mountains shooting up, exactly like pictures of growing plants taken with a strobe camera. The flinty peaks glinted like rows of teeth. Wyatt's heart came up in his throat. He understood that Makvern and Brinna must know what they were doing, and he was determined not to yell, but he found himself trying to push his feet through the floor in an involuntary gesture of putting on brakes.

The two craft tilted and swung across the face of the Moon—it was only the airlessness of space and the brilliance of the reflecting sunlight, Wyatt knew, that made the surface seem close enough to reach out and pick up the perfectly defined chunks of broken pumice as they passed. Plains, craters, pinnacles and ranges, blinding white or etched with inky shadow, flashed beneath them and then they were on top of the terminus and over it and it was night again, black, black, black and hung with stars.

Wyatt shook himself, feeling dazed. It was like a plunge into deep water, stunning. The filter shield slid automatically away from the window. He looked out at the hind side of the Moon, glimmering mysteriously in the eternal starshine, and was not very surprised to see that it looked very much like the familiar face.

Once more the two craft tilted and swung, and Wyatt saw the ship.

IT HUNG MOTIONLESS between the Moon and the stars, an enormous cylindrical shape catching dull glints on its flanks and its blunt nose. He could only guess its size by the area of stars it blotted out, and even that was only a guess. It was big. Big enough.

It was not showing any lights at first, but then one came on, laying a hard white path across the empty blackness. Makvern's craft found the path and raced along it, slowing as it went, and presently vanished.

"What is it?" asked Wyatt, and Brinna said,

"Scout tender. You didn't think we were going all the way to Alpha Centauri in these skimmers, did you?"

Wyatt said, "I hadn't really thought about it, one way or the

other."

Alpha Centauri, he thought. My God.

Brinna put the skimmer, as she called it, into the lighted guide-path.

"You're likely to have a fairly rough time of it," she said. "They will question you. They're not brutes, but they're thorough. I won't be able to do anything about that. But hang on, and I'll arrange your escape as soon as I can."

"Thank *you,*" said Wyatt bitterly.

"If," said Brinna with equal bitterness, "you hadn't been in such a blazing hurry to make me go to Washington, you wouldn't be here. So don't blame me for all your troubles."

The skimmer slowed, climbing up the beam of light.

A resurgence of panic took hold of Wyatt. "Why Alpha Centauri? Why do I have to go there?"

"Two reasons. We work well ahead, always planning the next campaign before we finish the last one. I told you they'll question you. In the normal course of events you would be shown the Centauri campaign so that you could get a clear idea of just how we work, and then you would be used to persuade your people not to resist."

"But you'll arrange my escape before that."

"I'll do what I can," she snapped, "as long as you keep your mouth shut. Now we're going in, and from here on you're just another captive."

Wyatt looked at her. He didn't trust her promise, not at all. He thought he had better never trust this dark girl too far.

The skimmer rose up into a great hatch. Wyatt heard a thunderous click transmitted through the air in the cockpit and felt a strong jar as what he thought must be a magnetic grapple took hold. Beyond the window now he saw a brightly lighted space that looked as big as Grand Central, equipped with great incomprehensible pieces of machinery. None of them looked like any propulsion or communication machines he knew. How did a faster-than-light ship communicate, anyway? An idea came to him.

Small figures moved out there. He recognized them as men wearing spacesuits. The suits were astonishingly like those being tested by the Air Force for high-altitude flying. He thought the A.F. boys would be glad to know their designs were good.

The skimmer was dormant, being lifted and handled by forces outside. Brinna said, "We have to wait

for pressure to build up."

The huge hatch doors beneath had closed. Presently Wyatt heard sounds faintly from outside the skimmer, chiefly a throbbing noise like the beating of a gigantic heart which he thought must be the air-pumps.

He nursed the idea that had come to him. He didn't think it was a very good idea but it was the only one he had, and he had to do something, try somehow, to get a warning to Earth. He could not just wait for Brinna to help him escape, it might never be possible—even if she wasn't double crossing him as she was obviously double-crossing someone else. He'd try his own way.

Soon a light showed on the control board and Brinna pushed a lever under it.

She got up. "All right," she said. "You go ahead of me."

Wyatt rose, his hands still tied. He passed through the aperture and onto the narrow stair which had unfolded from the rim. There was a platform under the bottom rung and he stepped onto it. Brinna came behind him. The skimmer hung suspended from a grapple on an overhead track. Makvern's craft was just beyond it on a similar grapple. At the end of the track was a mobile rack with three skimmers already in it and two empty slots. Three other racks held fifteen more, stacked up like pies in a bakery.

THE MEN IN SPACESUITS—some of them were women—were taking off their helmets. They were looking at Wyatt, interested but not unduly so. Makvern was walking toward them. He also was looking at Wyatt. His eyes were dark and his skin was leathery with exposure to many suns. His hair was rough and wiry, iron gray. His shoulders were wide and his body was hard and narrow and his legs were long. Wyatt thought if he had not met Makvern in another time and place he might have liked him. As it was, he hated him.

Makvern nodded to Brinna. He wore the same black uniform, but the insigne on his shirt was different and contained a ruby stud. He watched Wyatt as another man untied his hands.

"A technician, eh?" he said, speaking English no better than Brinna did, but perfectly intelligibly. "Good work, Captain. We have needed one badly."

"Thank you," said Brinna. "I hope he'll be useful."

Makvern said to Wyatt, "What is your field?"

"Communications," said Wyatt. "And I can tell you right now

that I don't know anything more about weapons and defense than anybody who can read the daily papers, and that I won't be useful at all."

Makvern said, "I see Brinna explained to you why you were being brought here."

"She did. Fully."

"Well," said Makvern. "Come along."

He walked away and Brinna motioned for Wyatt to follow and he did, padding in his sock feet over the deck. It was a hell of a thing, he thought, to be on his way to Alpha Centauri without any shoes.

But his hands were free now. They were so sure he couldn't escape, inside their ship. Well, he couldn't. But maybe he could do something else. He looked at Makvern as they walked along the huge room.

"Star-ships," Wyatt said. "Faster than light. How the devil can you communicate at speeds and distances like that?"

Makvern smiled slightly. "That's right, you said you're a communications man. Well, there are ways. There are beams you never heard of."

"I'd like to see an outfit that can send a signal faster than light," Wyatt grunted.

Makvern looked at him thoughtfully. "Why not? We'll be going right past the communic room."

Brinna looked as though she wanted to say something, but she didn't, and they went on out of the hold and through a neat functional labyrinth of corridors.

"Here we are," said Makvern and opened a bulkhead door.

Wyatt sprang forward, low and fast, like a football player making a desperate tackle. His shoulder struck Makvern in the small of the back, his arms clasped him tight around the waist, and his weight bore him forward and down, through the door into the communications room. They hit the deck together, Wyatt on top, Makvern grunting heavily from the impact. Two men inside the room sprang up from their places in alarm. Wyatt turned his head and saw Brinna in the doorway and kicked the door shut in her face. There was no way to lock it. He scrambled to his feet, wild with the need for haste, and he realized then that Makvern was not moving. He must have hit his head on the deck when he fell. Wyatt dragged him against the door to block it, and by that time one of the two men had turned back to his instruments and was shouting into what Wyatt assumed to be the ship's intercom.

The other man was almost on top of him.

Wyatt could not possibly avoid that rush. The man was big and he was young and strong and he pinned Wyatt against the wall and pounded at him. Wyatt did not worry about prize-ring rules. He lowered his head and butted, hard. The man staggered back and Wyatt gave him a clip on the jaw to help him down and then made a rush of his own, at the man who was busily arousing the whole ship.

This man was not a pugnacious type. He looked at Wyatt with large horrified eyes and flung up his hands in a vague gesture of striking but Wyatt's fist took him solidly in the face and he whimpered and turned around and folded over his own knees.

The communic room was now quiet, except for a series of noises outside the door. Wyatt stood panting, looking at the maze of equipment.

Right here within reach was the means of warning Earth. The radio system on this ship must be strong enough to blanket every receiver on the planet. All he had to do was figure out how to use it.

He swore in an agony of frustration. Nothing was marked right, nothing was as he knew it. It was all there, and it was totally useless.

He reached down and took hold of the man who was crouched on the deck near him. He dragged him upright. He shook him.

"Listen," he said "Listen, you're going to get this thing working. Understand?"

The man shook his head dazedly from side to side and said something in his own language.

Wyatt's grip became cruel. "You're going to send a message to Earth," he said, and then Makvern spoke quietly behind him.

"He can't understand you, Wyatt. Let him go."

WYATT SPUN AROUND, still holding the man. Makvern had got up. He was standing beside the door with a weapon in his hand. The door was now open and Brinna was standing in it, her thumbs hooked in her belt, watching. Men were arriving behind her in the corridor.

Wyatt said, "If you shoot me you'll get your own man too." He shifted his grip, dragging the man closer to the control panel. Feeling even while he was speaking the absolute hopelessness of this last ditch play, he said,

"Tell him what I want or I'll smash your communication system so thoroughly—"

"It was a good try, Wyatt," said Makvern, not without a certain admiration, and pressed a stud on his weapon.

Wyatt never knew what hit him.

When he awoke he was lying in a bunk in a small metal cabin. Close beside his head there swung a curious helmet-like device linked by cables to a squat cabinet.

Makvern was standing looking down at him. He looked alert and wary and his hand rested casually on his holstered side-arm.

"How are you feeling now?" said Makvern.

Wyatt started a sour reply, and then he froze in an incredulous astonishment.

Makvern had not spoken in English. He had spoken in a totally strange language—and yet he, Wyatt, had understood him!

"What—how—" Wyatt began.

Makvern smiled. "How do you know the language of Uryx, our language, all of a sudden? Simple. Learning-tapes."

He gestured toward the helmet and the cabinet. Wyatt gaped like a yokel. It was too uncanny. Hearing words he'd never consciously heard before, and yet understanding them—

He articulated with difficulty. "Learning-tapes?"

Makvern sat down. "You've been under a seda-ray for some days, Wyatt. In fact, we're nearly to our rendezvous with the fleet, off Alpha Centauri."

So time had passed? That wasn't surprising. But this other thing—

Makvern went on. "Don't you yet have it on your Earth, the technique of teaching arbitrary knowledge to a subject in his sleep?"

Wyatt began to get it now. "You mean, a recorded voice repeating facts over and over in a sleeping man's ear? Yes. We have that—but it's not good enough to teach a man a whole new language in sleep."

"With us," said Makvern, "it is good enough. We always use it, once we pick up the vocabulary and grammar from our first captives. Makes it easier to question them. Instead of all our intelligence officers, technicians and so on having to learn the captive's language, we give him *our* language."

It was still too much for Wyatt to take in. He lay looking at Makvern, and after a moment he said,

"You seem like a decent guy, not a butcher or a greedy conqueror type. Maybe you can tell me what gives your people the idea they've a right to go around acting like a bunch of goddamned bandits."

MAKVERN SMILED faintly. "Probably," he said, "because that's exactly what we are. Uryx is still a young empire. I imagine you have learned on Earth

how empires grow—starting from a small weak poverty-ridden state fighting for its existence and becoming, by the process of eating its neighbors, a tremendous power able to conquer everything in sight. When it does this it wants to gorge itself on all the things it never had before."

He made a sweeping gesture. "Wealth, beauty, techniques, cultures, knowledge, everything under a thousand suns that can enrich or entertain us. We are still in this stage of acquisitiveness."

Wyatt grunted. "That all sounds very philosophic, but it still doesn't make you anything but bandits."

"When we join the main fleet," said Makvern, refusing to be angered, "you can take that up with Varsek."

"Varsek?"

"Commander in Chief of the Task Force. The—ah—Boss, I think you would say."

"I'll be glad to take it up with him," Wyatt said, "And if he thinks he's going to get any help from me, he's wrong."

He looked up at Makvern and he said suddenly, "You deliberately gave me a chance at that communic room, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

"Yes. You didn't have to show it to me, you must have known what was in my mind. But you had no intention of letting me get a message off to Earth. You shammed unconsciousness till it looked like I might make it, and then you came to and stopped me."

"Why would I do a thing like that?" Makvern asked calmly.

"Why, indeed? That's what I'm asking."

Makvern said, "Perhaps I was testing you to find out something, Wyatt. Let me ask you a question in return. Why did you let Brinna capture you so easily?"

"What do you mean, easily?"

"You had a weapon. Yet you didn't use it on Brinna. Why?"

Wyatt became instantly wary and on guard. Makvern, then, suspected the arrangement between Brinna and himself, suspected Brinna of a double-cross? He'd better be careful.

He said, "What's this about Brinna? To me, she's just a female wildcat that dropped out of the sky."

"She is what you would call very high brass," Makvern said. "A high officer of the Task Force, completely trusted by Commander Varsek."

Had Makvern faintly emphasized the word "trusted"? Wyatt wasn't sure. He was only sure now that some devil's broth of intrigue went on in the immense Task Force that followed its looting voyage

through the galactic suns, and that he, Wyatt, was less than the smallest pawn in the hidden game.

"I wouldn't," said Makvern, "think too much of Brinna. She's beautiful, I know. But she's in love."

Oddly, Wyatt felt a pang to hear that. "In love? With whom?"

"With power," Makvern said grimly, and then the next moment the light in the cabin went blue and there was a vertiginous shock that made Wyatt feel as though he was falling, falling, everything gone from around him, plunging through abysses of darkness—

A whining sound went up to a shriek and passed beyond hearing, and then the lights burned white again and the dizziness in his head passed.

"What the devil—" he began huskily.

Makvern stood up. "We just went out of overdrive. We've reached the Task Force. Come on, Wyatt—for you, this is it."

CHAPTER IV

HERE IN THE WINDOWED bridge, the background was all stars.

Clouds of stars, rivers of them, chains and globes of them, and drawn across them here and there like curtains of the most glorious fire ever imagined were the shining nebulae. They were all colors. Red, blue, smoky yellow, green, diamond white. Some of them, Wyatt realized, were not stars at all but galaxies, scattered out in careless millions through the apparently infinite universe. To an earthbound, skybound man like himself, this was almost too much to take. Look at ten billion stars and a million galaxies and all the empty space between for them to roam around in, and realize that this *is* the universe, you are in the middle of it, not standing on the edge looking up the way you do on Earth but right in the middle of it, the nothingness and allness of it without end, amen. If you have no religion you get one in a hurry, because obviously only God could have made this.

Wyatt was dimly aware that someone—Makvern—was talking to him. Alpha Centauri. A hand pointed, guiding him back from the infinite to the particular.

Ahead, still very far away but close enough to stand out from among the more distant stars like a beacon lamp, was a yellow sun.

"There's a companion," Makvern said, "but it's insignificant and did not prevent the formation of a stable planetary system around the primary. Alpha Centauri has eight planets—it's very much like your own Sol. The two inner plan-

ets are too hot, and the outer ones are too cold, but the third and fourth support life. The third is closer to the sun than Earth and is still in a comparatively primitive stage of evolution. We can pick up minerals there but nothing else. The fourth world is our target."

Wyatt shut his eyes against the blaze of suns and nebulae and wheeling galaxies and tried to concentrate on Alpha Centauri, its fourth planet, and himself.

"Where's your fleet?" he asked, and opened his eyes again, looking closer at hand instead of trying to see the end of creation.

Once more Makvern pointed.

Once more Wyatt was stunned, this time in a much more personal way. Suns and galaxies were beyond him, the incredible handiwork of God, but men had built these ships. And the one was almost as overwhelming a thing as the other.

It was the hell and all of a fleet.

It too was a long way off, though not anything like as far as Alpha Centauri. Makvern explained that they did not attempt any very close maneuvering in hyper-drive, where you counted your fractional seconds of error in multiples of parsecs. The main task force would approach the system of Alpha Centauri at planetary speeds and deploy according to the master attack plan already decided upon while the fleet had been busy plundering the hapless worlds of the star-system before this one. The scout ship was now on an intersecting course.

Wyatt watched this convergence with a mounting awe and an increasing conviction that no matter how many warnings he might bring to Earth it would not do them one bit of good.

He had thought the scout tender was huge when he first saw it hanging beyond the dark side of the Moon. The closer he got to the fleet the smaller the tender seemed to him and the smaller he felt himself, until he thought that this must be pretty much like a minnow's-eye view of a school of whales passing in all their majesty, accompanied on the flanks by the swift sinister forms of great sharks. The analogy was obvious but not a bad one, Wyatt thought. The phalanx of huge dark shapes swam in space as in black water, touched with vagrant gleams of light that might have been phosphorescence instead of starshine. The hugest of them—the heavy support craft, the troop transports, the supply ships, and the swag-bellied monstrosities that Brinna said were used to store and carry loot—travelled together in a wedge-shaped formation, with the flagship at the apex. Ahead and on both wings were the smaller,

faster destroyer-type craft, heavily armed but maneuverable. These were the spearhead of any attack, and the defenders of the fleet from any hostile action in space. Behind came a shoal of smaller craft like the tender, the inglorious but indispensable work-horses of the fleet.

CLEAR ACROSS THE GALaxy these ships had come, built and manned by humans, conceived in their brains and controlled by their hands. It seemed a pity their purpose could not have been more noble.

The Task Force swept closer and closer, rolled over the tender like a mighty wave, engulfed it, and carried it along in its resistless rush toward Alpha Centauri.

A communicator at the back of the bridge, which had been rattling away in the course of routine technicalities, suddenly changed its tone. "Clear channels," said a brisk important voice. "Clear channels for Number One." The operator at Fleet Control whose image had appeared on the screen promptly pulled the switch on himself. Involuntarily everyone in the bridge room snapped to attention, even Makvern and Brinna.

Swiftly, under her breath, Brinna said, "What does he want that couldn't wait for our regular report?"

She looked worried. Guilty conscience, Wyatt thought. But Makvern's conscience was clear, at least where Wyatt was concerned, and he looked worried too. Almost, you might say, apprehensive.

When he turned to face the screen there was no sign of this in his face, nothing but the properly alert expression of a staff officer about to speak to his chief.

A smartly turned out operator, owner of the officious voice, appeared in the screen. "ST-6," he said. "ST-6, this is Number One calling. Number One, calling for Staff Captain Makvern."

Makvern stepped forward into the pick-up area. "Captain Makvern here."

"Stand by, sir. Commander Varsek is ready to speak to you."

Makvern stood by. He seemed perfectly at ease. Brinna's mouth was drawn tight and her eyes were narrowed. Wyatt started to say something and she shook her head at him fiercely. He shut up. The bridge waited silently as though the Supreme Being was about to step into it.

The operator had vanished from the screen. It remained blank for a moment or two. Then it brightened again and Commander Varsek was mirrored in it.

He nodded to Makvern, who saluted. He was sitting behind a

big desk covered with charts, papers, microfilm spools, a couple of viewers, and various communic media. In contrast to the immaculate turn-out of his operator—and everybody else that Wyatt had so far seen—Varsek's uniform shirt was open down the front, his sleeves were rolled up, and the shirt itself looked as though he had been digging ditches in it. He gave the impression of a man enormously embroiled in work, the two-hours-of-sleep-a-night, coffee-and-benzedrine-and-I-thrive-on-it type that automatically makes everybody else feel like a lazy slob. All this part of him Wyatt found only mildly irritating. It was Varsek's face and what he sensed behind it that made Wyatt feel he could really hate this man.

Varsek was a big lean man, and his face was big and lean, with a lot of bone in it and no softness anywhere, and no warmth, and no friendliness. He smiled, and the smile was a lie. Wyatt thought all the rest of it was a lie too, or at least a deliberate pose. Only his eyes were true. They looked at Makvern, and then at Brinna, and then for quite a long moment at Wyatt, and they were rapacious and hungry, cold and cruel, highly intelligent, and disconcertingly demonstrative of a mind capable of handling nearly anything.

"This is your captive, is it?" he said. "Good. He looks more intelligent than any I've seen yet." He turned his attention back to Makvern. "I've sent a skimmer for you. You too, Brinna."

Makvern said, in an almost too carefully expressionless voice, "We were about to report to the flagship."

"This is important, Makvern. Can't wait. I've got Loran aboard, very sick, about dying I'd say. I want you and Brinna here." His gaze flicked again to Wyatt. "Bring him along. It may help him to understand us better."

"Yes, sir," said Makvern.

Varsek nodded and the screen went dead.

Somebody said, "Skimmer's coming into the airlock now, sir."

Makvern turned around and looked at Brinna. His face was absolutely white. So was hers. White, frightened, and bitterly angry.

"Who is Loran?" asked Wyatt.

"One of our under officers," Makvern said, too quietly. "Come on, we mustn't keep them waiting."

They left the bridge and went, not below to the main launching hold, but aft to a small lock. On the way Wyatt asked,

"Can you tell me what's going on?"

"For your own sake," said Makvern, "no."

They got into the skimmer and the pilot took it away and they sat stiff and silent like three people going to a wake. And Wyatt had an idea he was about to get a little closer to the truth of whatever forces were operating behind the scenes here. He needed to know, needed it desperately. He was prepared to sell or doublecross anybody including himself in order to get a warning to Earth in time, but before he could do that he had to know who was buying, and what, and for how much.

The skimmer passed swiftly through the fleet, past the great dull-gleaming hulls tarnished by a thousand atmospheres, pitted and scarred by the cosmic dust and drift of half a galaxy.

The black enormous form of the flagship loomed ahead, blotting out the stars. The skimmer was gathered into it. A minute later, as they stood close together at the ladder head, Makvern whispered in English,

"This is going to be ugly. Keep out of it, you understand? No matter what!"

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WAS obviously sick, probably dying, painfully, spasmodically, and not from natural causes.

He was a fairly young man, younger than Makvern, older than Brinna. He was strapped onto a kind of flat cradle made of a plastic mesh, and this was suspended in a circular pit, not very deep. Above the man, almost but not quite in contact with his body, was a double row of crystal rods, their bottom ends close together, their top ends spread to form a V. They were served by power leads that went away somewhere to the sides of the pit. Every so often, in answer to a signal, power was fed into the double-rods, a rapid flicker of bluish light ran up and down through them, and the man below them writhed and sobbed in a grotesque and hideous agony.

Varsek gave the signals. He was sitting on a seat above the shallow pit, where he could look down comfortably into Loran's face while he talked to him. There was a ring of seats around the pit. Wyatt sat in one. So did Makvern, and Brinna, and several other officers Wyatt did not know. The pit was situated in the center of a quite small room with soundproof walls and a single door, very thick and having a lock on the inside. The room was deep in the most secret bowels of the flagship.

The crystal tubes were dead

now. Loran rolled his head from side to side and moaned. He had bitten his lips and tongue, and he was bleeding slightly from the nose. Varsek watched him. There was not a sound in the room other than Loran's m o a n i n g. Nobody moved. Nobody met anyone else's eye. Nobody spoke. There might have been a concourse of waxen dummies above the pit.

Except for Varsek. He spoke. He called Loran by name, several times, with a dispassionate persistence, until he answered. Then Varsek said.

"Who is the leader of the Second Party?"

He had asked that question fifty, a hundred times before, in exactly that tone of voice.

And Loran answered, as he had fifty or a hundred times before, "There is no Second Party." Only his voice was weaker every time he said it.

And Wyatt was sicker. He clenched his hands and shut his jaw tight. There was nothing he could do. He kept telling himself that. There was nothing he could do.

Varsek said, "It's no use to lie to me, Loran. There is a Second Party. Every ship in the fleet including this one has some officers and some men who are not loyal to me—who are in fact dedicated to the task of taking the fleet away from me. This I know Loran, I have absolute proof. I'm only asking you who the leader is."

"There is no Second Party."

"Is he one of my staff officers, Loran?"

"There is no—"

"Which one?" And he named them through one at a time, including Makvern and Brinna, every one that was there, and they sat in the bright light with blank faces and fear in their eyes.

Loran said, "There is no Second Party."

"Let's be realistic about this," Varsek said. "Your friends, the men you're so nobly protecting, can't help you now. I'm the only one who can. I can have you up out of there in a minute, with the best medical attention and everything you need to fix you up. All you have to do is answer my questions. That's your duty, isn't it, Loran? Didn't you swear an oath of loyalty to Uryx and the government of Uryx, and to me as the duly appointed servant of that government?"

No answer.

"You're a young man, Loran. I don't imagine you love the idea of death. Why leap at it? Tell me the names of the disloyal officers you know, and you can live."

Loran said distinctly, "Go to

hell."

Varsek gave the signal again. The banked rods pulsed and flickered, and whatever nerve-searing, flesh-torturing force was in them went to work on Loran.

WYATT GOT UP. He called Varsek the dirtiest name he could think of, in a kind of choked and half-articulate voice, and then he started for him. It was obviously a silly thing to do but he wasn't really thinking about it. He just had a simple desire to stop Varsek from doing what he was doing.

Several of the officers—Makvern was one of them—caught him before he had taken two steps. Varsek glanced around. He smiled briefly. "I thought you looked like a brave man," he said. "Brave men are usually stubborn. That's why you're here, to see what happens to brave stubborn men."

"There are a lot of them on Earth," said Wyatt fiercely. "They haven't broken for other dirty little tyrants and they won't break for you. Remember that."

Makvern snarled in his ear, "Shut up for God's sake. And sit down," His face was rigidly controlled but in his eyes, deep down, there was a wildness of hate and fury that startled Wyatt into obedience. He allowed himself to be forced back toward his seat. And then Brinna stepped forward and said to Varsek,

"It might be safer, sir, if I put him with the other prisoners now."

Varsek considered that, totally undisturbed by the deathly sounds from the pit. He studied Brinna, who was looking rigidly past his head at the opposite wall. He studied Makvern, who was now as blank as a stone, so that Wyatt wondered if he had really seen what he thought he had seen in Makvern's eyes. He studied the others, who showed varying degrees of unhappiness, and then he said to Brinna,

"You look ill, Captain. How would you expect to command a battle fleet if you can't stand to see one man die?"

Brinna's body was absolutely rigid. She said, "Are you accusing me of plotting with the Second Party to take command? If so, I request a formal—"

Varsek shook his head. "No accusation, Brinna. Merely a statement. I know how it eats on your soul that you probaby never will command a fleet just on account of your sex." He grinned at her. "Sex isn't the whole story, Brinna. I'm merely pointing that out to you. Ability and toughness have something to do with it too. Isn't that so, Makvern?"

"I suppose so, sir."

The man in the pit howled like a tortured animal. Varsek pushed a button impatiently and the rods stopped flickering and the howling ceased.

"Very well," said Varsek, turning away, "take your delicate stomach away from here. And maybe you can put your sex to some use with the prisoner. Try it, anyway. The rest of you stay here."

Brinna saluted, turned smartly on her heel, snapped, "Follow me," at Wyatt, and marched toward the door. Wyatt glanced at Makvern, who refused to look at him, and went after Brinna.

He was thankful to get out of the room. Sick and raging himself, he did not feel like talking and Brinna's face discouraged him anyway. The way her bootheels rang on the iron floor he thought that she was wishing Varsek's head under every one. Finally, when they had left even the level of the pit-room behind and were walking together along an upper corridor with nobody else in sight, he did speak.

"Are you plotting with the Second Party, Brinna?" he asked.

"No," she said savagely. "I am not. I hate everything they stand for."

"But you are plotting against Varsek?"

She stopped and looked at him with eyes as lambent as those of an angry cat.

"If you have thoughts of helping your own cause by going to Varsek about me, forget them. In the first place, Varsek helps nobody. In the second place, I can have you silenced before you could ever get to him."

"No," said Wyatt slowly, "I wasn't thinking of going to Varsek. But what he said about you is true. You do want the command. You figured that Earth, armed and prepared, would give Varsek such a setback that you might be able to oust him and take over."

"Do you blame me?" whispered Brinna. "He's a swine. A cruel, treacherous, sadistic swine. You saw him. No wonder there's a Second Party."

"How big is it, Brinna?"

"Big enough to worry Varsek. Loran is the third poor devil he's tortured to death trying to find out who's in it. He hasn't managed it yet, but he will. And then—" She made an expressive gesture of slashing.

"You said you hated everything the Second Party stands for. What does it stand for?"

"Peace," said Brinna, as though it was a shameful word. "They want to take the Task Force home and force the government to stop

this galaxy-wide swing of conquest."

"And you don't want peace?"

"I'm a soldier. What use would I be at peace?" Her face was hard, shining, exalted with ambition. "Not while I'm still young and unsatisfied, anyway. Listen, Wyatt. I told you women are not segregated and discriminated against in our society and that's true—except for top positions of power in politics and the military. Even there it's never stated openly. But somehow or other the women candidates never quite make it. I'm going to be the first one to break that custom. I am going to command this Task Force."

SHE PUT HER HAND on his arm, speaking rapidly, with urgent force. "I'm not alone, Wyatt. I have a powerful group behind me. Varsek isn't popular with the officers. The men love him because he wins battles and looks the other way when they abuse the native women, but they don't have to deal with him. All we need is an excuse—a demonstration that Varsek has blundered badly—and we can step in. *I* can step in. Earth could give us that excuse, if your people put up enough of a surprise fight. So you see our interests do run together."

"That far, they do," said Wyatt. "But afterward?"

"What do you mean, afterward?"

"After you take over. What happens to Earth then?" He shook her hand away. "Don't treat me like a fool, Brinna. You don't take over from Varsek on the grounds that he's failed and then admit that you too are licked by the same situation."

Her eyes had narrowed and the anger-light was in them again. "So?"

"So you will then proceed to smash my world. You have to, to prove you're more capable than Varsek. Otherwise, somebody will oust *you*."

"I warned you before not to let your cleverness betray you," she said. "Let's be realistic about this. Earth is our next target, she's going to be hit warning or no warning, and she's going to be beaten. Now. Do you imagine Earth can get better and more merciful treatment from Varsek, or from me?"

"When you put it that way," Wyatt said thoughtfully, "I can see a preference. All right, Brinna. When do you think you can arrange the escape?"

"The only chance will be some time during the attack on Alpha Centauri. I'll get word to you as soon as the arrangements are made, but don't get impatient. You heard Varsek. I'll have to move

very cautiously."

"And what happens to me in the meantime?"

"You'll be questioned. Oh, not like that. Varsek reserves the pit for special cases. By our Intelligence group, by subterfuge—the captives' quarters are thoroughly monitored and don't forget it—and by Varsek himself, probably. Don't antagonize him, Wyatt, or you could find yourself in the pit at that."

They had come to a transverse corridor, and now Brinna gave him a warning glance and said in a sharp impersonal tone, "That way." Her hand was on the butt of her stunner.

Wyatt turned obediently, into the transverse corridor. A guard who had been lounging midway of it snapped to attention. He was stationed beside a door. Brinna marched Wyatt up to him and said, "Another one for the tank," and the guard said, "Yes, sir." He did a complicated series of things with his hands, apparently activating power sources that released various locks, and the door opened.

"Inside," the guard said to Wyatt, and jerked his thumb.

With no further word to Brinna, Wyatt stepped through the door.

It closed behind him with the sound of a bank vault shutting for the night.

The room he stood in was fairly large and it had bunks all around the walls. About sixteen bunks, Wyatt thought, and there were about a dozen men sitting on the edges of them, or sitting around a table bolted to the floor in the center of the room. They were all looking at him. They were the damndest collection of humanity, or whatever you wanted to call it, that Wyatt had ever come across. He remembered Brinna's complaint that the accessible people, the ones easily picked up without giving any wide-spread alarm, usually lived in isolated regions and were without much in the way of technical knowledge.

He could see the problem, all right. Of the five Earthmen there, one was an Arab in a dirty burnoose, one looked like a young Apache Indian in old farm clothes, and one, at a guess, came from Chinese Turkestan and smelled of camels. The other two were closer to home. One was medium-tall and stocky, with a thick chest and thin strong legs. He wore faded Levis and high-heeled boots and his face was burned brick-red to the middle of his forehead. Above that his skin was as white as a baby's. A Stetson hat hung on a peg over his bunk. The fifth man, who sat beside him, was cut out of the same cloth, but somehow with a dif-

ference. Wyatt was puzzled for a minute, and then he remembered once seeing an Australian movie with a long lean leathery actor named Chips Rafferty in it playing a stockman, and he thought he had the answer.

The other six men in the room were not from Earth.

The other six men in the room were not human.

Not as Wyatt was used to thinking of human, homo sapiens, tracing a well-fossilized descent back through the various *anthropus* forms and ultimately to the primal ancestor. These six walked erect and had facile hands and humanoid bodies and quite handsome faces, but whatever their primal ancestor had been it had not been like man's. It had left them a legacy of body hair that could not be called anything else but fur, and their skulls were curiously elongated rather than domed, and their finger-tips still had their ancient claws, retracing catlike into the flesh. Catlike, Wyatt thought, was a good word for them—and yet not quite Earthly-catlike. The ears were too round, the eyes too large and dark and capable of warmth. They wore garments of fine cloth in bright shades to set off their individual color, and in size and facial conformation they were as different from each other as the Earthmen were.

They looked at Wyatt, sitting in two double rows on the edges of their bunks. The Earthmen looked at Wyatt. And in no eye, human or humanoid, was there a spark of friendliness.

Wyatt said, "Hello."

There was no answer. The stocky man and the long lean one got up, and each one hitched up his pants and left the thumbs of his hands sticking negligently in the waistband.

"Look," said Wyatt, annoyed, "I didn't come here because I wanted to, but I haven't got smallpox or whooping cough, and I haven't wronged anyone's sister."

The two men began to walk slowly forward. The young Apache rose and came after them, a dark gleam flickering deep in his eyes. The Arab rose, and then the Turcoman, and then the six lithe furry men came dropping one by one from the edges of their bunks and all of them moved toward Wyatt, not speaking.

A cold qualm of fear contracted his heart. He set his back against the door and braced himself.

"What is this?" he said. "What are you doing? I'm an Earthman, a captive like you. Why—"

"You're no Earthman," said the stocky southwesterner, in a very cold, mild voice. "You're another

goddamn lousy spy."

They came at him all together in a swift purposeful rush.

CHAPTER VI

INSTEAD OF COWERING against the door or trying to get out, as they expected him to do, Wyatt sprang straight for the man in the Levis. He was easy to get at because he was leading the others by a pace or so. Wyatt hit him.

"Spy, am I?" he snarled. He was mad. The rush closed around him but he hung onto the man, who snorted and grappled with him, and they toppled over thrashing and kicking among the legs of the others. "I'll show you who's a spy," he said. The tall man he took to be an Australian bent over and started to pull at him, and he kicked him furiously on the shins. "One at a time, boy. Keep your paws off." He rolled with his enemy, pounding on a cast-iron body and getting knocked dizzy himself in return. He began to swear. He had never been much for swearing, but the injustice of this attack inspired him beyond his talents. He went on pounding and cursing until after a while he realized that his target was no longer in range and that he was alone in a small circle, surrounded by the others who were looking down at him. He crouched there, blinking, and saw the man in the Levis wiping blood off his mouth with the back of his hand and studying him speculatively.

"So I'm a so-and-so saddle tramp, am I?" he said.

"Yes, and a damn dumb one," said Wyatt bitterly. He got up, bunching his fists.

"Real fast now," said the stockman, "who was it died at the Alamo?"

"Davy Crockett," said Wyatt. "King of the wild frontier. Also William Barret Travis and Jim Bowie and a lot of other good men who never had songs written about them. Come on, let's finish this."

"No," said the other man, stepping back. "I don't reckon anybody but an Earthman could swear like that without stuttering, nor want to fight like that. What would you say, Bill?"

The Australian said he agreed.

"My name's A. C. Burdick," said the stockman, holding out his hand, "and I'm a long way from home. Sorry about jumping you like that, but we've had three guys in a row claiming to be captives like us, only they weren't, and we're getting sick of it."

Still glowering, Wyatt shook hands with him, and then with the

Australian. The Arab and the Turcoman muttered and returned sulkily to their places, apparently disappointed that there had been no bloodshed. The Apache youth stood and regarded Wyatt with an unwinking stare from under his greasy hatbrim.

"This here is No-Name," said Burdick, grinning. "He was sleeping out in the hills when he was picked up—you know, some of them still find out their warrior-name by getting it in a dream the old way. He figures this is all part of the dream and is waiting till he wakes up."

Wyatt noded to No-Name, who inclined his head briefly and went back to his bunk where he sat cross-legged, patiently brooding.

Burdick shifted from his native tongue to the language of Uryx and said, "These gentlemen are from Alpha Centauri Four."

The furred slender men clasped their hands and raised them to their breasts. One of them, who was jet black and dressed in a scarlet tunic, said in the same tongue,

"I am Thurne of Obran, a king's messenger. I was taken as I crossed a plain, carrying a message between kings. Now there will be war for all."

The others nodded sadly. Wyatt, all his anger forgotten now, said, "Yes, and for my world too."

"Well," said Burdick, "come in and make yourself at home."

THE TIME that followed then was something of a nightmare to Wyatt, not too protracted but intense. It was a strain watching his tongue when he talked with the others, knowing that every word he said was being listened to outside. The Arab, the Turcoman, and No-Name awaited whatever thing might happen with their several brands of fatalism but Burdick and the Australian had a clearer understanding of the situation and were frantic to do something about it. He would have liked to offer them a word of hope, but he did not dare to. For the Alpha Centaurians, Wyatt knew, there was no hope, and they knew it too. With each passing hour, as the fleet roared on its way, Wyatt wished more earnestly for something evil and permanent to happen to Varsek.

It didn't. The only thing that happened was that Wyatt was hauled out away from the others at frequent intervals and questioned, questioned, questioned until he was too dazed and tired to form words any more. He tried not to tell them anything at all, but they were experts, and he suspected that they learned almost as much, if not more, from what he refused

to tell them as from what he did. His only comfort was that he had no knowledge of armaments or defense beyond what any ordinary citizen might read in the papers, and which Fleet Intelligence had doubtless also read.

He sweated through it the best way he could and waited for word from Brinna.

It did not come.

Makvern came instead. He said, "Varsek wants to see you."

Wyatt went with him and they walked briskly through the corridors.

"What does he want with me?" Wyatt asked.

"You'll have to ask him," Makvern said.

"Did Loran die?"

"Yes. He died."

"Did he talk?"

"No."

"Then the Second Party's still safe."

"For the time being," said Makvern. "Only for the time being." He would not turn to look at Wyatt. His profile was as expressionless as a king's head on a coin.

Wyatt hesitated while he took three steps, knowing that if he guessed wrong he would almost certainly wind up in the pit, and that Earth quite certainly would be worse off than ever. Then, considering what he had to gain if he guessed right, he plunged.

"The Second Party," he said, "could take over if Varsek had a serious setback at Earth. Then they could take the Task Force and go home. They could start exporting some things from Uryx, like peace and stable government, instead of importing nothing but loot."

Makvern continued to walk briskly, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

"How would you propose that Earth could give Varsek a setback?" he asked.

"Get some of us back to Earth before the fleet, to give warning."

"That kind of talk," said Makvern evenly, "could get you and possibly a number of other people killed. I suggest that you stop it."

His tone was hard, perfectly cold and inflexible. Wyatt's heart sank. He had guessed wrong and Makvern was not one of the underground. And yet he had been so sure, the way Makvern had looked when Loran was suffering in the pit—

An orderly passed them into a huge room that was obviously used as an outer office, full of communic equipment, recorders, electronic files, and busy men. A second orderly opened the inner door for them, and Wyatt found himself

looking at Varsek as he had first seen him on the communic screen, sitting behind the big crowded desk with his shirt open and his sleeves rolled up, the picture of demon energy.

HE NODDED and Makvern stepped back a little, leaving Wyatt alone, as it were, before Varsek. Varsek picked up a report and shook it at him.

"This is from Intelligence," he said. "It's not satisfactory. You're not cooperating, Wyatt."

"Would you expect me to?" said Wyatt.

"I expect you not to be a fool," said Varsek. "Look, I'm going to loot your planet. You know that, don't you? All right. Now if I know where things are I won't have to smash a lot of other things trying to find them, will I? And if there's no attempt at resistance, then nobody will get hurt, will they?" He threw the report. "You're not helping Earth, you're making it harder."

"I told everybody in the beginning," said Wyatt sullenly, "that I don't know anything more than they can find out themselves from reading a popular magazine."

"You're a native. You know more about it than we could ever find out in the time we have, and you have a scientific background. You must know approximately where the largest uranium deposits are, for instance, and the main sources of radioactive isotopes. Yet you refuse to verify our information, or correct it if it's wrong."

"That's right," said Wyatt. "I do refuse."

"Brave and stubborn," Varsek said. "Well. I know how stubborn you are. I could find out very quickly about the bravery."

"In the pit?"

Varsek nodded. "What would you say, Makvern?"

"It's up to you, sir," Makvern said, shrugging.

"No opinion at all?"

"None."

"That's not like you, Makvern."

"It's impossible to have any opinion of value concerning the advisability of—ah—questioning a man I don't know at all. I have no idea of his limits. If they're easily reached, fine. If not, he's likely to die before you know it."

"True," said Varsek. "True. And he's the best bet to transmit a convincing message to Earth when the time comes, assuring them of the futility of resistance." He leaned back in his chair and scratched his chest reflectively, studying Wyatt with his bright cold eyes, and Wyatt had an uneasy feeling that Varsek was thinking rapidly of a great number of

things only remotely connected with him except that they might have an indirect bearing on his life or death.

"Well," said Varsek finally, "there's always time for the pit later on. We'll follow the customary procedure. Arrange for Wyatt and the other Earthmen to have a good clear view of what happens when we hit Alpha Centauri Four, which will be—" He frowned at a desk chrono. "—in approximately five hours. I want you to watch carefully, Wyatt. This world isn't as mechanized as parts of yours and it doesn't have nuclear power, but it's civilized. Remember that. And remember that your nuclear weapons wouldn't be much more effective against us than their explosive devises."

He jerked his thumb at Makvern. "Get him out of here now. I've got half the planning still to do for this campaign, without worrying about the next one."

He became furiously busy. Makvern ushered Wyatt out and down the corridors again. This time Wyatt did not speak at all, and neither did Makvern. They parted at the door of the prisoners' quarters.

THE FIVE HOURS seemed more like five centuries. The only chance for an escape, Brinna had said, would be during the confusion of the attack. He didn't know whether she had been able to arrange it at all, and if she had, whether he might have made Makvern suspicious and ruined the whole thing by his attempt to make a better deal for Earth through the Second Party. He chewed his knuckles and sweated and thought wild thoughts about escaping somehow on his own hook, but he couldn't plan anything with Burdick and the Australian because it would be overheard, or seen.

The other Earthmen were all restless and upset, as though they sensed a coming crisis. The Alpha Centaurians waited quietly, by contrast. Only their eyes shone with a terrible light. By God, thought Wyatt furiously, I'll kill Varsek with my own hands if I have to, I swear it. It was a childish thing to say even to himself, and he knew it. But he had never meant anything so much.

The Task Force hurtled on, a school of killer whales racing toward an unsuspecting victim.

The door opened and Brinna stood there. There were guards behind her.

"Come," she said. "All of you."

She stood aside while the captives filed out. As Wyatt passed her she gave him one quick fleet-

ing glance. Hope sprang up in him. She had arranged something, and whatever it was he and the other prisoners would see that it worked.

They were marched through the corridors under guard and into a contact lock, where a small craft clung like a remora under the chin of the flagship. Here they were separated into two groups. The Alpha Centaurians were sent down first. Wyatt heard a clashing of metal, and then the Earthmen were ordered down and placed in a semicircular room which was half of an observation turret. The Alpha Centaurians were in the other half, fully visible but securely barred off by a partition of metal rods.

Similar rods slid down behind the Earthmen into slots in the deck. Wyatt stayed beside the doorway. He heard Brinna dismiss the guards. Their feet clanged on the ladder, going up. Brinna came along the corridor and stopped on the other side of the bars. She was blazing with excitement, triumph, hate, a lot of things that had been bottled up in her and which she was daring now to show.

"It's all arranged," she said, speaking rapidly but in a low voice. "All but two of the crew are my men. When we're clear of the ship, pass the word quietly to be ready when I—"

She broke off, whirling around, her face suddenly alarmed. Someone was coming down the ladder from the flagship.

It was Makvern, coming fast, and he held a stunner in his hand.

Brinna controlled herself admirably. She said, "Is there some trouble, Makvern? The prisoners are all secure—"

"I'm sure they are," said Makvern. He reached the foot of the ladder and an officer appeared as though he had been waiting for him. Makvern nodded sharply and almost at once the warning bells were ringing and the hatch was sliding shut. A moment later Wyatt felt the jar as contact was broken and the small craft fell free on its own power.

Makvern stood looking at Brinna and Wyatt. "I imagine," he said to Wyatt, "that she was telling you most of the men aboard belong to her. She was just a little bit mistaken. All of them belong to me."

CHAPTER VII

BRINNA'S FACE was now absolutely white, with her red mouth showing on it like a smear of blood. She dropped her hand to the grip of her own stunner.

She almost made it but not quite. Makvern hit her full on with a crackling charge and she fell and lay still and senseless.

Makvern sighed. "Poor Brinna. This is like snatching food from someone that's starving—I almost regret it—"

"I'll bet you do," said Wyatt. If he could have got his hands between the rods and around Makvern's throat he would have killed him. Burdick and Bill Whitfield, the Australian, had joined him now, and Whitfield asked, "What's up?"

"Nothing," said Wyatt with intense bitterness. "Not a damn thing, thanks to me. I had to get smart."

He felt sick with the knowledge of his own folly. He had taken the chance on Makvern in the hope of sparing Earth any attack at all, and this was what had come of it. He and Brinna would now go together to the pit, and what would happen to Earth would happen.

He pushed Burdick aside and went across the narrow room to the curving glassite-panelled wall on the other side and stood there. The others left him alone.

He heard movement and voices in the corridor, but he paid no attention to them. Nothing was important now. He looked out into space, lighted with the baleful light of the twin suns, and saw the whole great Task Force spread between him and the stars overhead, the destroyers coursing ahead of the main body, all their hulls glittering bright, beautiful, swift, deadly, a brazen spear for the slaying of planets.

The small craft in which he and the others were imprisoned was dropping below the fleet. It was extremely difficult to judge speeds here where there was nothing to go by but the stars, but Wyatt thought the Task Force must have been decelerating for some time as it approached its target, and that the small craft was moving considerably faster than the main body. He watched, simply because the ships were before his eyes, and he began to realize that this little ship was leading all the others down to battle.

"Like a damn Judas goat," he muttered, and Burdick spoke from beside him.

"They took that lady officer away," he said. "I reckon she's in trouble?"

Wyatt said, "The worst. She was going to help us escape."

Burdick said shrewdly, "Bill and me figured it was something like that. Too bad it went wrong."

Wyatt explained why it had gone wrong. "I should have been content with what I had. But I thought if—oh, what the devil's the use of hashing it over!" He looked at the steel rods that separated them from the Alpha Centaurians. "If we could just get

those bars out of the way, get all together, the twelve of us—we might still do something. This is a small ship. It can't carry much of a crew, probably not more than five or six beside Makvern. If we could rush them and take the ship, we might be able to force them to fly it to Earth—"

Moonshine. Fool's talk, the babble of desperation. On the other hand, what did they have to lose?

Their lives, of course. But that would have to be up to the individual. As far as Wyatt was concerned, the pit was no beautiful prospect.

And if they succeeded—if—

"Well," said Whitfield, "let's get cracking." He crooked his finger at the Arab, the Turcoman, and No-Name.

In the spaceship, with the incredible panorama of space and the racing war fleet beyond the observation panels, the six Earthmen held a conference, speaking to each other not in their own diverse tongues but in the language of Uryx, a place they had never seen and had not even known existed until suddenly it had become the most important thing in their lives.

The conference was brief. When it was over Wyatt and Burdick went to the wall of rods and talked to the Alpha Centaurians.

THURNE OF OBRAN spoke for them all. "We will fight," he said. "We will fight gladly." He turned and pointed, his eyes blazing with a feral light that made him look more like a black panther than a human man. Wyatt followed his gesture and saw a misty blue planet rushing toward them in the golden glare of the primary.

Burdick said matter-of-factly, "Before we do any fighting we got to get out of here, so we better start looking for holes."

They looked. They had no way of knowing whether they were being watched as they had been on the flagship, but they had to risk that. They tested every rod and searched in vain for a weak spot. They tried by main force and by cleverness and there was no way. And the blue misty planet rushed closer and spread into a vast globe, and the blue color faded into greens and browns and ochres, splotched with the harsher blue of water. A high-pitched shrieking began and grew in intensity. The blaze of the sun was softened and the stars were blotted out. Clouds whipped and rolled and were gone, and the wild downward rush stopped. The ship hung in a greenish sky, and there was a yellow desert of sand and tumbled rock below. Cutting through the desert was a gorge with a river in the bottom

of it, and where the river left the gorge at the edge of the desert was a green and most beautiful land full of little streamlets and flashing lakes, with queer-colored orchards and many-colored fields. And in the middle of the land there was a city.

"Obran," Thurne said.

Wyatt took the rods in his hands and strained until the veins swelled to bursting on his forehead and his face was crimson.

He could not budge them, but the other rods that barred the corridor suddenly slid up out of the way and Makvern stood there with another officer behind him.

Makvern said, "Wyatt—"

But Wyatt had already spun around and launched himself like a charging bull at Makvern.

He hit him and knocked him back into the other officer. There was a moment of wild confusion, while Burdick and Whitfield and the others piled through the door and into the fray. Wyatt was only clearly aware of one thing and that was that he had Makvern down and that he was going to kill him and it was all very pleasant. Then Whitfield was hauling at him and saying something about needing this one later on and Wyatt allowed himself to be hauled away, and the fight was over. This much of it, at least.

Burdick pulled Makvern to his feet and held him with one arm doubled behind his back. The Turcoman was methodically strangling the other officer and Wyatt went over and made him stop, explaining that the man might be necessary for flying the ship. Then he turned back to Makvern, who was shaking his head hard to clear it.

"Take their stunners and keep watch," Wyatt said to Burdick and Whitfield. "No-Name, you hold him. Good. Don't be afraid to hurt him a little—remember Cochise." He spoke then to Makvern. "How do I raise that partition?"

The Alpha Centaurians were all squeezed against it, trying to see what was going on.

Makvern said, "I'll raise it myself in a minute. God, Wyatt, don't you ever think before you jump?"

"I've thought," Wyatt said. "Plenty. Where's that control? And where's Brinna?"

He nodded to No-Name, who exerted pressure. Makvern began to look really angry. He snapped,

"Will you stop bawling at me and listen? I'm on your side. I'm the man Loran died for. I *am* the leader of the Second Party!"

The other officer, who had finally recovered his voice a little after the Turcoman's mauling, croaked

out, "You won't be the leader of anything for long if we don't get that broadcast going. The flagship has already checked us once. If Varsek' doesn't find you anywhere else in the fleet and we don't behave just the way we ought to—"

MAKVERN GLARED at Wyatt. "Well? Do you still want to go to Earth, or would you prefer to accompany Brinna and me to the pit?"

Wyatt said to No-Name, "Let him go."

"Thanks," said Makvern sourly. "This shows signs of becoming a habit. I would have liked to tell you earlier that plans were already laid, but I didn't think it was wise. Varsek is unpredictable. He might have sent you to the pit—"

"Yes," said Wyatt. "You were a big help there. No opinion. You might at least have said no."

"If I had, you'd have been there in five minutes. Anyway, I've been teetering on the brink of that pit for weeks. All I wanted to do was hold out until now."

"So you let Brinna go ahead with this on her own hook, to kind of cover for you?"

"Yes. It kept her busy, and kept Varsek puzzled about me. It worked out well. Most of Brinna's men are really Second Party men, though it's going to be a shock to her to find that out. We were taking no chance of exchanging Varsek for another ambition-hungry chief, even if this one is female and handsome."

He had moved into the observation cell and was talking as much to the Alpha Centaurians as to Wyatt and the Earthmen.

"Your idea of warning Earth and using a setback there to put us in power—the same thing Brinna had in mind—wasn't a bad one, except that we can't wait that long. Varsek is alarmed. He's willing to torture the whole fleet if he has to to root us out. We would have liked to put this off until we were just a little stronger. The fleet has been away from home a long time now and discontent is growing among the men—we could have capitalized on that. But we have no choice. If we don't move now we'll be destroyed, inevitably. So we're making our break at Alpha Centauri."

"How?" asked Wyatt.

"A full-scale revolt is out. Things will go well here, not much effective resistance and a lot of loot. Men don't oust a leader under those circumstances. We can't hope to take over the whole fleet. After the ships have landed and the ground phase of the attack is under way, we'll separate ourselves from the main force and take over

as many of the destroyers as we can man. Anybody that wants to can come with us—in the heat of a successful battle, I'm afraid that won't be many. After that—" Makvern shrugged. "There are too many variables. I don't know."

"Can you help my world?" asked Thurne. "My city?"

Makvern said sadly, "I won't lie to you. No. Except in that Varsek will have fewer men and ships, we can't help. We're not strong enough."

"And you would not fight against your own comrades, anyway," said Thurne.

"Not under these circumstances, no. That would be too much of a stab in the back and we'd lose all chance of ever winning them over. About all I can offer you, Thurne, is the hope of vengeance and the promise that if we do win we'll make what restitution we can."

"And what about us?" asked Wyatt. "What about Earth?"

"We'll send you there. If Varsek is sufficiently shaken up there may not be any need for a warning. If not—well, his force will be that much the weaker."

Wyatt looked at the others and said, "That's fair enough."

Makvern turned to the Alpha Centaurians, who had been talking among themselves.

"Varsek is already hunting for me through the fleet. He's been told that I'm not here but if anything about the required routine of this ship is wrong he'll send a force at once to search it and that will be about the end of me and the revolt both. What do you say, Thurne? Can I raise the bars as between comrades, or must I treat you still as captives?"

Thurne said, "Raise them. We will do what we can against Varsek."

"Good," said Makvern. "Good!" He called to the other officer and the steel rods slid up out of sight. "Now we must hurry. Thurne, you were given some instructions quite a while ago. Follow them. I know they're distasteful to a brave man, but you'll be doing your people no disservice. To urge them to fight against us would be suicidal."

"Nevertheless," said Thurne, "they will fight."

MAKVERN SIGHED. "That's usually the case. Make the speech anyway. That's what we're here for. We're leading the whole fleet, remember, out in front where everybody can see us."

He showed the reluctant Alpha Centaurian where to stand, on a lens-like circle of crystal in the deck, with a similar one over his head. Almost at once both lenses

brightened, so that Thurne stood encased in a pillar of light.

"But," said Wyatt, "there are no radios down there, no receivers. His culture hasn't built them yet. How are you going to broadcast?"

Makvern motioned him and the other Earthmen to the observation panels on their side of the cell. "Watch," he said. "That's what you're supposed to do anyway. The value of example. The prospective victim is softened up by seeing what happens to his predecessor."

He started away. "I've watched enough of these things, world after world. They make me sick. I have things to do now. Listen for the intercom and be ready to jump when I tell you."

He went out. Thurne stood stiffly in his pillar of light. The ship dropped lower over the city of Obran. And now the ships of the Task Force had begun to come into view in the higher air.

A metallic voice said, "Begin the talk, Thurne."

Burdick said suddenly, "I'll be damned. Look there."

In the clear air above the city, ahead of and below the ship, stood a gigantic three-dimensional image of Thurne, perhaps thirty feet high, moving slowly as the ship moved, his insubstantial feet brushing the tops of the queer ornate towers. And now Thurne was talking. Faintly through the hull came an echoing vibration from outside, and Wyatt knew that Thurne's voice, as greatly amplified as the prismatic projection of his personal image, was booming out over Obran. Down in the streets, in the sunlight, between the tall buildings and in the parks and along the rows of little mudbrick houses, people were running out to stare up in fear and amazement.

Thurne was speaking to his people in his own tongue so that Wyatt could not understand the words, but from his tone and the snarling glint of bared teeth he was not preaching submission as whole-heartedly as he might have done. Probaby the Task Force was used to that. They could not control their captives absolutely on these propaganda broadcasts. They gave them the chance, and probably it paid off in enough surrenders to make it worthwhile. With more primitive people than Thurne's, the appearance of a giant in the sky over their heads would be enough in itself to make them collapse in utter panic.

Down below in the sunlit streets the people began to run here and there, and a haze of dust arose and shimmered. From the towers and the high walls a million carven faces looked out unmoved, the faces of a million dancing stone

gods and goddesses.

The fleet came down in a whistling rush among the orchards and fields, burning and crushing wherever they landed in a great circle around the city. The people ran. They had no nuclear weapons, no ground-to-air missiles, no planes. They ran and there was no place to run to. They were already trapped.

Poor devils, thought Wyatt, and imagined what New York or Washington would be like under similar conditions, with a gigantic image of himself striding the sky and bellowing at them to surrender. The success of Makvern's revolt and the creation of a wide split in the fleet itself were now his only hope that that might not happen.

"I thought," said Burdick, "that Thurne was so sure they'd fight."

"They will," said Wyatt. "Look. The panic's already quieting." The women and children had disappeared from the streets now. Groups of men still ran but their running was purposeful. Suddenly from various places around the outskirts of the city puffs of smoke burst out and Whitfield said,

"Little cannon, by God!"

The pillar of light flicked off. The image of Thurne disappeared from the sky. Makvern's voice came over the intercom. There was an iron note in it.

"We've been ordered to land at once beside the flagship. Obviously we can't. And if you look up you'll see trouble on the way."

They looked. Two small fast craft, light-armed but plenty heavy enough for the propaganda ship, were headed in their direction.

"They will attempt to force that landing on us, and I can't fight them in this tub. I propose to land at once. It may be rough, so take what precautions you can. Wyatt, there's a supply of stunners here. Come and get them."

Wyatt found his way to the bridge. A case of side-arms, apparently fresh out of stores, had been smuggled there and hidden alike from Varsek's men and Brinna. Makvern's face was wire-drawn with tension and excitement. He showed Wyatt the case and then handed him a three-pronged key.

"She's in the skipper's cabin—it's the only one that's locked. Don't give her arms or a chance to make trouble. Apart from that I leave her up to you."

Wyatt said, "Thanks."

Makvern went out, hurrying.

They smashed open the case and served the stunners out, but Wyatt didn't wait for that. He grabbed one for himself and then went hunting for the skipper's cabin. He could hear a mounting tumult from the bridgeroom. The ship was low,

skimming the housetops, lurching this way and that so roughly that it was hard to stand up. The two pursuing ships were closing fast.

He heard Brinna before he found her. She was shouting through the door, demanding to be freed. Wyatt struggled with the unfamiliar lock. The ship rocked wildly. There was a roar and a crack like the grandfather of all lightning bolts. Blue fire sheeted from the metal inner surfaces. Half stunned, he saw the door come open under his hand and then Brinna seemed to leap through the air at him, her eyes wide and her arms outstretched. She hit him, but he was already flying backward himself as the ship went out from under him and they fell together against a wall that had suddenly become a deck. There was a very great noise and a sound of things moving and somehow the branches of a tree had appeared, stuck through the broken port of the skipper's cabin which was now directly overhead.

CHAPTER VIII

IT TOOK WYATT quite a long minute to realize that he was still alive and not even badly hurt. He didn't know about Brinna, but when he pushed her off him he was relieved to see her move. He scrambled to his feet and helped her up. Makvern came from the direction of the bridge. He shouted and made urgent motions. He was bleeding from a cut on the cheek and his shirt was torn. Wyatt pushed Brinna toward him and clambered over the buckled walls to the observation chamber.

Burdick and Whitfield and the Apache were already crawling toward him. The Turcoman came after them, but the Arab was dead, lying in a corner with his head twisted under him. The Alpha Centaurians had taken less damage on their side. Three of them were hurt but they were all able to move. Wyatt shouted at them to come out and made his way back to where Makvern and the officers from the bridge had got the hatch open. In a minute he had dropped out of it perhaps eight feet to the ground, in a tangle of broken trees, and the others were coming one by one after him. The two ships, one of which had brought them down, had shot over them and away, presumably to turn and make another pass.

Or maybe there was no need for another pass.

They had crashed at the edge of the city, just missing a row of mudbrick houses shaped like ovens with round brick roofs. Beyond, the ships of the Task Force stood like ominous towers in the green

fields, discharging their ground attack vehicles.

Wyatt had heard about these but he had never seen any. Every destroyer carried a number of them to clear the way for troops, in the manner of tank units, only these were not in any way like tanks. They consisted of a monstrous red globe mounted on four jointed legs which were about four times a man's height so that the globes stood high off the ground. There was a small propeller mount underneath so that the globes could become amphibious at need. They were horrible-looking things to come stalking at you over the flat fields, and they were stalking pretty fast. Some twenty yards away to the right a battery of three small shiny cannon popped and banged, served by furry men whose courage was only exceeded by the futility of what they did.

Makvern was talking. He was fierce and alert, a man caught in a tight spot and determined to get out of it.

"Our men are to gather in the northwest sector of the perimeter. We'll try to fight our way to them. This sector here is designated as northeast and we're pretty close to the middle of it, so it could be worse. Stick together and let's go fast."

Brinna said quite coolly, "Watch it, they're coming within range."

They began to run, away from the wrecked ship and toward the row of houses, bunched together and looking warily over their shoulders. One of the globes in particular seemed to have decided to follow them—probably it had been ordered to after the ship crashed. Now Wyatt could see a circle of round shuttered ports around its top, and one of them had opened. A large sort of gun or projector was rising from the hole on a flexible mount, bobbing about in an inquistive fashion like the head of a bird on a long neck. Suddenly it made a point directly at them and a brilliant white beam shot toward them. They leaped for cover between the houses, but the beam was short. Where it hit the ground it erupted into a shower of green sparks.

"Heavy-duty stunner," Makvern said. "When one of those hits you you stay down till the battle's over."

They ran again, ducking and dodging between the queer round-roofed houses.

"Don't they kill?" Wyatt asked.

"Not often. The very old, little children, invalids. It's humane, as weapons go."

Another white beam sizzled down close behind Whitfield, bursting

green where it hit. The red globe towered over them against the sky, grotesquely like a huge round-bodied quadruped with a ludicrously small head on that bobbing little neck.

"I don't reckon," said Burdick, "that we're going to outrun that for long."

THURNE TURNED a slitted panther look on the globe and said, "I can lead you by safer ways, if you can run very swiftly ahead of it for a little time."

"We can run," said Makvern.

They ran. Wyatt, Burdick and Whitfield all had ideas about giving Brinna a hand, only to find that she was going fleet as a deer with long clean strides. They ran their hearts into their throats and the breath clear out of them and they made it into a long colonnade that covered the walk beside a great building covered with the rows of sculptured dancing gods that seemed to delight Thurne's people. In the broad street men were dragging more of the queer little cannon into place. Their body-fur was dark and mottled with sweat. Several of them left the cannon and came leaping toward Makvern's party, their teeth and claws bared, but Thurne shouted at them in his own tongue and they stopped reluctantly. The five who had been captive with Thurne now ran to join the men with the cannon, which were already hurling shot at the stalking globe and not hurting it at all. Thurne pointed to a wide low door and said, "In here."

They crowded through. Over his shoulder, in the brilliant sunlight outside, Wyatt saw green fire in the street. The cannoneers fell down and the little guns were silent.

Inside it was quite dark by contrast, a great vaulted place so crowded with carvings and shadows that for a minute or two he couldn't tell if anything alive was in there or not. Then he got the sounds, the breathing and stirring, the whimpering of small creatures, the whisperings. His eyes adjusted to the dim light and he saw that the place was full of women and children huddled along the walls on either side and in the alcoves which he supposed were shrines because they had big ornate statues in them and little lamps. The children, especially the very young ones, looked like oversized kittens.

Makvern said, "See those statues, and the gilding of the vault? All gold, and the stones are real too, every one of them. A poor place to seek sanctuary from looters."

The hot feral eyes of the women made Wyatt shiver. All along the

way they would rise and come out with a white gleaming of claws and teeth. If it had not been for Thurne they would have been torn to pieces in seconds. Wyatt was glad when they reached the other end of the building and emerged again into sunlight and the sharp sounds of battle.

The red globes were stalking everywhere now, their monstrous forms visible over the roofs of houses or between the towers of the larger buildings. The defenders were being struck down or driven back into the heart of the city, and troops of Uryx were already in the outlying streets, beginning the systematic business of sacking Obran.

A globe had just passed by in the street, leaving in its wake a litter of stunned forms that looked sufficiently like corpses, but the troops had not yet come in sight. There was another huge carved building across the way. They raced toward it, and the men who were operating the departing globe did not see them in time to fire.

This building was better lighted inside, although it had just as much carving, gilding and statuary as the last one. This was obviously a hospital. Some of the patients began to scream at the sight of the strangers and attendants ran to bar the way. Once more Thurne's authority got them through—almost. This time, as they reached the doorway at the far end, a party of Varsek's troops came in.

There were eight or nine of them with stunners in their hands. They were expecting trouble but nothing more than they could easily handle, and the first thing they saw about the group inside was the uniforms of Makvern and his officers. The leader actually saluted, and while he was doing it he saw the Earthmen all armed, and the Alpha Centaurian armed, and he said in sudden alarm to his party,

"Look out, these are the people—"

He didn't get any farther. Makvern's stunner knocked him down and then Wyatt began firing and so did the others. There was a brief but violent crackling of beams, and when it was all over seven of the fleet party were down and two had made it out the door. Whitfield and No-Name and two of the officers had gone down.

So had Thurne.

From here on they were on their own.

"Well," said Makvern grimly, "let's get them up and out of here."

WYATT HEAVED No-Name onto his shoulders and Burdick carried Whitfield, his long legs

dragging. They left Thurne where he was, with his own people. Burdened and staggering, they started out the door. And now Brinna said,

"You'd better give me a weapon."

Makvern shook his head.

"I don't see what you're afraid of," she said. "I know you won't kill me and I know Varsek would. He wouldn't believe any story I could tell him now."

Makvern hesitated and then said, "All right. Take one of theirs."

She picked up a stunner and they all went out together, cautiously, into the bright sun.

Here they were near one corner of a broad square. A globe was marching toward them on its jointed stilt-legs, coming up the street to their right, with men on foot following behind it. There were overturned cannon and fallen men near the corner, where the beams had hit, and other men were running away across the square, their faces wild with fury and fear and helplessness.

Makvern pointed to the mouth of a street diagonally across from them. "Make for that. Our ships should not be far beyond here now, if—"

Wyatt thought he was going to say *if the Second Party has been successful.* But he didn't. It was hardly worth bringing that up, not now.

They ran out across the square, heavy and slow with their burdens.

Once again they were lucky. They made the transit past the corner before the men in the globe could fire at them, and then the buildings protected them. A haze of dust and smoke hung in the air. The queer high-piled towers and the crowded masses of carving seemed to waver like things seen through water. The gods and goddesses almost seemed to move, dancing and smiling with fierce, grotesque dignity.

Some of the Alpha Centaurians who had been running away saw them and turned back.

They had weapons like very primitive pistols, and they had long sharp knives. The ones with pistols paused to load them. The others charged. And from the street behind came the measured clanging tread of the globe.

Wyatt fired. Nobody stopped running, they didn't dare to, because the globe was a worse enemy than these furry men. They fired as they went and some of the Alpha Centaurians fell under the stun rays and the rest turned back, waiting for the others who were loading their pistols. Wyatt panted and labored on under the weight of the Apache. The mouth of the street was not far away now.

Brinna and those of the men who were not burdened had lagged behind to cover the others. Their stunners crackled. Another one or two of the furry men went down, and then there was a series of sharper crackling sounds and one of the officers stopped and looked down in astonishment at the hole in his middle, from which blood had begun to flow. A ball hit close to Wyatt's feet and skipped away over the stones. Others rattled off the walls.

Makvern yelled to them to hurry, sweeping the Alpha Centaurians with a continuous flare from his stunner. Brinna was helping the wounded man, half carrying him and firing steadily with her free arm. Wyatt softened toward her immensely in that moment.

The street mouth swallowed them. In almost the same instant the walking globe rounded the corner. Its heavy beams took care of the Alpha Centaurians, which was a favor to Makvern's party that was more or less forced upon it. It would be after them too, probably, but in the meantime the street ahead of them was clear and there was a bend in it that would give them protection.

They staggered on, in the dust and the hot sun. They rounded the bend and Wyatt saw a short row of little houses and over them the tall distant forms of ships.

He thought for a minute that they were safe, that they had made it. And then he saw the uniformed troops running up the street toward them, utterly cutting them off.

CHAPTER IX

MAKVERN SAID sharply, "Hold your fire. They're ours."

It was a minute before Wyatt took that in, and by that time someone had lifted the ten-ton weight of No-Name off his back and he was being hurried along the street and out across the fields toward the ships. There was some fighting still going on—the Second Party men had attacked the skeleton crews left behind after the troops disembarked, and a few of them were still holding out.

"We'll have them mopped up soon," a young officer panted, running beside Makvern. He looked as though he had had a rough time. "God, I'm glad you got through, sir! We were trying to find you—"

"How well did we do?" asked Makvern.

"We've got about one third of the fleet. I was hoping—"

"Yes," said Makvern. "So was I. Well, a third is better than a quarter, or a tenth."

"It's hardly a victory, though,"

said the young officer flatly. He pointed off across the fields in the distance. "Look there, sir. Varsek's starting to pull some of the men back to their ships. He can catch us dead on the ground."

"Send an order to prepare for take-off at once," said Makvern. "Is this the command ship? Good. Get everybody here aboard, see that the wounded are cared for. I'll want—" he reeled off a string of names— "on the bridge immediately—"

Things were already moving fast. Now they raced, under the whiplash of Makvern's orders. Nobody stopped Wyatt, so he followed Makvern to the bridge. Even he could see the danger. If Varsek's heavy-armed units were manned in time to get above them they would be stopped before they started.

Makvern got his ships off the ground.

They roared screaming into the sky, and before they were clear of the atmosphere Varsek's face was mirrored in the communic screen.

It was a face flinty and implacable with anger, not the wild kind that soon burns out but a deeper colder thing that would last until the men he considered to be his enemies were no longer any threat to him or anyone else.

"Did you think you could go home to Uryx now?" he asked, looking at Makvern with his cold eyes. "You may be free of the fleet but you're not free of me. If you go home I'll have you all tried for desertion. I'm still your chief, Makvern, and I have powerful friends."

"Who profit from the loot," said Makvern. "Yes, I know that. It was my thought that we could force a few changes at Uryx too, before it stinks too high of corruption."

Varsek laughed. "With the whole fleet, you might do that. With your handful—no." He leaned closer into the pick-up field so that he seemed to be coming right through the screen. "Listen, Makvern. You've made your move and failed. You can't fight me and you can't go home and you can't even run for long. You haven't enough supply ships. You haven't enough fuel or food. You'll have to start looting yourself or try stealing from me, and sooner or later I'll catch up with you and annihilate you."

"Annihilate," said Makvern slowly. "That's a big, cruel word. I wonder how your men will feel about it. We've been comrades for a long time and our quarrel is with you, not with them. Perhaps a lot of them are as sick of this life as we are and would like to get home

to the families they haven't seen in years. We didn't harm any of them when we took these ships, and we'll welcome any of them who want to join us, now or later. We'll be around for a while."

WYATT KNEW that Makvern was not talking to Varsek alone, but to all the men who would be listening to the communics all over the fleet. He was a good talker, but it didn't look to Wyatt as though talking was going to do him much good.

"If that is intended as a challenge," Varsek said, "I'll accept it. My plans will not be changed. As soon as we finish here we go on to Earth, and after that to whatever system offers the best pickings. I'm in no hurry, Makvern. I can go on indefinitely. Hang on my flank and hope for deserters as long as you want to. Sooner or later—" He brought his hand down in a slashing gesture. "—I'll destroy you."

His gaze slid past Makvern to Wyatt.

"I warned you twice," he said, "about the fate of brave stubborn men. Whether you stay with Makvern or go back to Earth I'll find you. And I'll give Earth some special attention because of you—we do have weapons that will kill at need." Once more he smiled, and now his gaze included both Wyatt and Makvern. "I know that Earth will be warned. I accept that, too."

"You might lose a lot of men," Wyatt said. "We're not quite as primitive as the Alpha Centaurians."

"You have nuclear weapons," said Varsek, "but no way to get them up to us in space. And people usually hesitate to drop bombs on their own cities, to destroy an invader who is only temporarily there. So your warning does not frighten me."

"We have tactical weapons, too," said Wyatt. "Or didn't you tell your men about those?"

"My men are soldiers," said Varsek, "not babies. Go home, Wyatt. Spread the alarm. And take Brinna with you. That was her plan, wasn't it—warn Earth and thus unseat me." His voice rose and it was as though he was shouting a warning to the whole fleet. "No one can unseat me! This is my Task Force, I command it, and I *will* command it, until such time as my superiors call me home."

"That will be never," said Makvern wearily, "as long as you keep the loot ships pouring into Uryx to make them rich."

He broke the contact—probably the first time anyone had cut Varsek off first. He turned to Wyatt

and his officers.

"Much of what he says is true. We are short of food and fuel. Both of those we can get at Earth, but it will have to be peaceably. I propose that we offer ourselves to help in her defense—that we force a showdown with Varsek by placing our ships between him and Earth. If we're to be destroyed, it might as well be now as later, when we'll be even weaker and less able to fight."

He looked with a terrible grim look at Wyatt and said, "*We* can carry nuclear weapons into space."

Brief minutes later, Makvern's little fleet, all fast destroyers and a few light supply ships that could outdistance the slower-moving Task Force, went into hyper-drive, headed for Earth.

And now the customary business of landing on a target world was played in reverse. They did not have a propaganda ship, but as soon as they reached the outer limits of Earth's atmosphere Wyatt began to broadcast, blanketing the Western Hemisphere with the ship's powerful transmitter. He sent the same message over and over again, beginning with, *We come in peace* and going on with a summary of the situation, begging the powers that were not to attack them when they landed. He had Burdick and the Australian speak, and No-Name, and even the Turcoman. He had Makvern speak.

But when an answer did come it was from the government radio in Washington forbidding them to land until the United Nations had been consulted and preliminary talks had been had with Makvern via shortwave, with proper assurances of their intentions. Then Bannister got a message through from the big transmitter on the mesa, starting with "What the hell happened to you, you can't be telling the truth!" Wyatt assured him he was, and Bannister said, "Then for God's sake don't land. Everybody's in a panic. They're evacuating Washington and setting up gun-emplacements on every corner, and the crackpots are having a field day. Wait until they all calm down!"

"We've been trying to make them understand," said Wyatt, "that we can't wait. There's a fleet coming right on our heels and if arrangements aren't made right now it'll be too late for all of us."

"Well," said Bannister, sadly and without hope, "good luck."

They went about their landing.

MAKVERN'S COMMAND ship came down in one of Wash-

ington's parks. They had decided that Makvern and Wyatt, with one man to operate the thing, would leave the cruiser in one of the stalking-globes. There was not room enough in it for Burdick and the other Earthmen.

Brinna had maintained a brooding silence all the way, but she broke it now by saying bitterly to Wyatt,

"You know your people out there are panicky about this sudden eruption from space—they'll destroy you before you can talk to them."

"I'll have to take the chance," Wyatt said.

"Just as you had to force me to take you to Washington—how long ago?" said Brinna. She added with sudden fierceness, "God defend us from having to do with fools!"

Wyatt grinned. "Are you angry because your schemes are ruined, or because I'm in danger?" Before she could make wrathful reply, he kissed her and pushed her out of his way, and went after Makvern.

They got into the red globe, and stalked out of the cruiser. They needed the globe, not for attack but for their own defense. Above them in the sky a squadron of skimmers wheeled, easily eluding the slower and clumsier jets of Earth, and keeping at such a low altitude that the planes hesitated to fire on them for fear of hitting their own men on the ground.

The red globe stalked ponderously into Washington.

Bannister had told the truth. The city was deserted except for soldiers. Watching the 360 degree screen inside the globe, Wyatt saw men in olive drab fire at them and he heard the vicious battle of bullets against their armor plate. Makvern had assured him it was proof against practically anything short of atomic projectiles, but when the anti-tank guns and the flame-throwers appeared Wyatt began to get nervous and was glad when Makvern decided not to take any chances. He ordered one of the heavy stunners unlimbered and asked for support from the skimmers. Then he turned the radio over to Wyatt.

The screens now showed bursts of green fire all around where the stun rays were striking. The gun crews were being struck down, the soldiers with rifles stunned or driven back. An area of quiet was laid down around the globe, travelling with it as it moved, constantly being pushed ahead by the white beams of the stunners.

Wyatt talked tensely on the radio. "You force us to defend ourselves but you will find that these men are not dead or harmed

in any way, only stunned. We beg the President and Congress to give us a hearing—"

No answer. Wyatt mopped sweat from his forehead, and talked on.

"You are faced with an enemy more terrible than any you ever dreamed of, approaching you through interstellar space at many times the speed of light. You see what we can do, but this is only a fraction of *their* power. Your only hope is to accept our offer of help, plan with us how to stop the Task Force before it ever lands. Or you'll have hundreds of these red globes stalking the countryside, and hundreds of ships against which your planes will be useless as they are right now against the skimmers."

No answer.

Makvern said to Wyatt, "We have to stop somewhere. This is your country—what do you suggest?"

Wyatt looked at the screen. They were in front of the Supreme Court building. Soldiers were firing at them from the approaches, the steps, the portico. Some of them had already been stunned and were lying on the pavement. While he watched a white beam shot out from the globe's projector and burst in green fire among a group on the steps. Wyatt's patience, worn thin by long anxiety, suddenly snapped.

"This place is as good as any," he told Makvern, and then he shouted into the radio, "All right, damn it, I'm an American citizen and I came here in good faith. I haven't committed any crime, and I don't see why I should have to hide and cower in the streets of my own capital, which were paid for out of my taxes. So I'm getting out of this globe, unarmed, and if any damned fool shoots me down he can take it up with his conscience later on."

He got up and snapped at Makvern. "Open the hatch. And pull that stunner in."

"Brinna was right, they're panicky," Makvern said. "They'll kill you. Wait a bit."

Wyatt swore. "We *can't* wait, it's now or nothing! They'll stay panicky until they actually see that I am an Earthman and not a bug-eyed monster lying to them over the radio. Then we may get somewhere with them."

Makvern hesitated a moment and then pressed a button. The hatch opened and a thin ladder extended itself.

Wyatt went down it.

He went down slowly, and it was a warm day in Washington but he was as cold as mid-December. The sweat of fear was clammy on him and his legs shook. The sol-

diers in the immediate vicinity were all unconscious or had taken cover, but more would undoubtedly come. He hoped their field command posts would relay his radio message to the men with the guns.

He reached the foot of the ladder and stood there.

There was a great silence. Then a soldier with a rifle edged cautiously around one of the pillars of the portico.

Wyatt watched him, thinking *He will raise that gun and fire and that will be the end of it.*

The man's voice reached him, thin with distance and surprise. "Hey, it's a man. It's human. It ain't no monster after all—"

From inside the open hatch of the globe Wyatt heard a radio-transmitted voice speaking.

"If you will withdraw your—er—aircraft as a sign of good faith, our representatives will come to—"

Wyatt didn't hear the rest of it too clearly. He was struggling with the reaction of relief. Not only for Earth, but for himself.

AFTER THAT it was not so difficult. Once the high brass was convinced of the danger, and of Makvern's sincerity, things got done in spite of red tape and provincial stubbornness. The testimony of Burdick and Whitfield, the Apache and the Turcoman, helped immensely.

Makvern's ships were allowed to refuel and take on supplies. They took to space again, but without any nuclear weapons aboard. "Those are my own people," Makvern said. "I can't use that against them."

The air forces of the world were deployed as a second line of defense, coordinated with ground-to-air missile batteries and with squadrons carrying air-to-air missiles. On the ground, the armies readied themselves.

Varsek's fleet came, a great dark arrow of ships into the light of the Sun.

Once more Wyatt was aboard Makvern's command ship, on the bridge. He was acting with others of the regular armed forces of several nations, as liason officer. He watched the dramatic wedge of ships approach, catching fire on their sun sides as they drew closer until their brazen glitter was painful to the eye. And his heart sank. What Varsek had said was true. Nothing could stand against that fleet.

As though to emphasize that point, Varsek's face appeared in the communic screen.

"So you decided to face me here," he said. "Good. Oh, very good!"

"Perhaps," said Makvern. "Perhaps not. Earth has been warned,

Varsek, and now I'm warning you and every man in the fleet. She has powerful armaments, including hydrogen devices, and she is prepared to use them. She can kill a great many of you before she's beaten."

"And who warned Earth?" said Varsek. Both men, Wyatt knew, were speaking to the fleet as much as to each other. "You, Makvern. A traitor's act. Every life we lose here will be your responsibility!"

"Not at all," said Makvern quietly. "You know what the situation is. All you have to do now to avoid any casualties is to withdraw the fleet from Earth without attacking."

"Turn tail and run?" said Varsek. "You should know me better."

Suddenly Makvern's voice blazed fierce, white-hot with old rage. "I know you, Varsek! You'll sacrifice every man in the fleet before you'll admit you've been bested. Remember that, you men, when he's ordering you into battle! Try to figure out what real reason you have for attacking and then see whether you think it's worth dying for! If you don't—"

Varsek's great voice drowned him out. "This is a general order to the Task Force. Battle stations, all personnel. Executive officers of destroyer squadrons Three, Four and Five will proceed with landing operations according to plan."

"You heard your commander," Makvern flared. "Go down and die for him, for his ambition and the fat pockets of his friends, if you want to. If you don't, take your ships out of formation and join us. Then we can all go home. Then—"

"Destroyer Squadrons One and Two," Varsek's voice rolled inexorably on, "will attack the enemy ships at once, proceeding at individual discretion. You will use Type Two armaments—*these traitors must be destroyed!*"

This time it was Varsek who broke the contact with Makvern, and it was as though by that gesture he declared them all dead.

"Well?" said Wyatt tensely.

"God knows," said Makvern. He began to rap out orders, preparing to fight his ships as well as he could.

Wyatt withdrew into a corner out of the way and found Brinna there. She was regarding the preparations inboard and the movements of the fleet with an expert, eager, frustrated gaze. The realization of the defeat of her ambitious plans changed her, Wyatt thought, very little.

"If *I* had the command here—" she said, between her teeth.

"I don't think you could swing the men in the fleet, if you had,"

he said. "Maybe even Makvern hasn't swung them—"

It didn't look as though he had. The Task Force was breaking up in orderly segments, the heavy attack craft wheeling into position behind their destroyer screens, ready for the screaming plunge downward into the sky. And now from their stations at either side of the forward point of the fleet the two destroyer squadrons leaped toward Makvern's ships.

"Type Two armaments," said Wyatt, "are the lethal ones, I take it. No polite stunning of the victim, just good honest annihilation."

Brinna nodded, her hand closing unconsciously on his.

Makvern was hunched like a bulldog in the forepart of the bridge, rapping orders.

"Hang on," said Brinna. "We move."

THEY DID MOVE, roaring straight up in an effort to get above the oncoming destroyers. Wyatt could see other ships going up with them, while still others dropped and circled. They were trying some kind of a boxing-in maneuver, but the destroyer squadrons were old hands at this game too. They counter-moved with lightning speed. Wyatt did not see any projectile pass through space, but suddenly there was a silent blossoming of fire like the birth of a small sun and one of Makvern's ships ceased to exist in the time it took Wyatt to blink.

"I believe," said Brinna in a steady voice, "that's the first time I have ever seen Type Two projectiles in use except on a test range."

There was a kind of a stunned silence on the bridge. Then once more the ship was in tangential motion, and somebody began to shout, "Look at their formations! Some of Varsek's ships are pulling out—"

"Fire!" said Makvern, and the ship shuddered twice. White stunning beams lanced out and struck a dark iron flank with green fire and sent it staggering away—Wyatt assumed that these beams were powerful enough to knock out not only men but delicate electrical equipment as well.

"They are pulling out," said Brinna. "Breaking up. Look!"

He could see that the orderly formations of Varsek's fleet had become suddenly ragged, some of the ships frankly deserting the ranks and others lagging as though they were hesitant.

"It was the projectile," Brinna said. "Seeing one of their own ships full of men they knew destroyed that way—I think it must

have shocked them all as it did me."

The face of a man appeared on the screen, white and strained. "Makvern," he said. "You know me—Shannar, commanding the First Squadron. I'm pulling out —this is murder—"

Varsek's face appeared, superimposed over Shannar's in a ghastly double image.

"Follow your orders! Destroy—"

"The hell with you," said Shannar. "I'm a soldier, not an executioner."

He faded, and a second face appeared through the image of Varsek. "Me, too. After what you've led us into, the Second Squadron is quitting."

Now Varsek's face stood clear in the screen, and outside in space the dark ships wheeled away and joined the number that were gathering behind Makvern's force.

Varsek, his face distorted with a violent fury, cried out, "I *order* the commander of every ship to proceed with his assigned duties! If he refuses, I authorize every officer in the chain of command to take over until one loyal man is found. I order this! Prepare to land. I'll destroy Makvern myself if none of you have the guts to do it."

And the great bulk of the flagship moved from where it had hung in space and gathered speed, and bore down upon Makvern's command ship like the ultimate hammer of doom.

"He must have packed the flagship with his most trusted officers," Brinna said.

Ignoring every other craft in space, the enormous ship rushed at them.

Makvern spoke into the communic.

"I don't think you quite understand, Varsek. The situation has changed. You are now fairly well isolated. There's been enough killing. Surrender and we'll see that you get a fair trial at Uryx."

"You won't live to go anywhere," Varsek snarled. He began to talk to others who apparently were in the room with him, out of range of the pick-up. "Why the hell doesn't the fleet move? I ordered them. Order them again, and prepare a projectile, Type Two —What are you waiting for?"

"Sir," said a voice, "have you noticed the disposition of the destroyer squadrons?"

"What of them?"

"They're between us and the target. All of them. The commanders request that you surrender. They say there will be no more Type Twos used on men of Uryx."

Varsek spoke into the communic. "Clear the way," he said. "I'll

ride over you and smash you. I command this fleet." He pulled his sidearm from its holster and turned around. "As for you—I thought you were loyal to me. I handpicked you, and this is how you repay me! I order you to prepare a projectile—"

A hard matter-of-fact voice said, "You pushed it too far this time, Varsek. You're one man against a fleet. We have been loyal, but you're not the commander any more."

A STUNNER BEAM caught Varsek from the back before he could turn around. He fell below the focus of the screen, and the face of another man replaced his.

The man said, "Varsek has surrendered."

There was a long silence in the command ship. Then the men began to cheer and other voices came over the communics, cheering, and only Makvern turned away so that no one could see his face.

Later, after Makvern had made his speech to the fleet, taking over as commander, he said to Wyatt,

"This is where we part. We go home, to put a stop to this looting and pillaging—it's time Uryx grew up and became an empire to be proud of rather than a nest of outlaws. And you can go home too, knowing that Earth will sleep safe tonight."

Brinna stepped forward. "And what about me?"

"I have that planned," said Makvern sternly. "You'll learn about it in good time."

Wyatt smiled, but did not say anything.

He had no chance to say anything later on, when the ship had landed on the desert near the mesa and Makvern and Brinna had shaken hands with him for the last time, standing on the cool sand in the moonlight at the foot of the ship's ladder. Makvern had moved so quickly while Brinna was occupied with her farewells that she did not realize he was already in the lock and the ladder drawn up until it was too late to follow him. He looked down at her and grinned, and said,

"This seemed to be the best solution to your problem, Brinna. It'll be a long time before Earthmen get into space, and by then you'll be too old to make trouble and I'll be too old to care."

"You mean you're leaving me here?" she shrieked.

"In the care of Wyatt, a brave and stubborn man. Goodbye. And clear away now, we're taking off."

Wyatt hauled the temporarily speechless Brinna to a safe distance. She watched the ship take

off into the starry sky and Wyatt did not dare say anything then.

He wasn't at all sure he had made a good bargain. But he was determined to make the best of it.

He started out by kissing her.

After a long enough time, she stopped fighting.



"Get him, Smedley! Let's see what kind of stuff you're made of!"

Like pioneers in Earth's past, Terry and his wife came to the red planet seeking their fortune. But others came too, ready to prove—

Death Walks On Mars

by

Alan J. Ramm

THERE WAS DEATH above. The Martian Sand Vulture swooped and hissed and twitched its barbed, poisonous tail in the thin air.

There was death below. The man lay cradled in the pebbly sand. Red sand that matched the color of his hair and the color of the blood oozing slowly from the hole in his forehead and trickling greasily along the inside of his punctured head-bubble. The air whistled thinly through the corresponding hole in the bubble as the oxygen converter tried vainly to maintain the proper breathing mixture.

There was death in the muzzle of the gun dangling nonchalantly from the tall man's gloved hand. It grinned from his face, etched in the sardonic twist that the purple scar gave to his right cheek. It danced in the emotionless distances of his eyes.

There was death in every beat of Leeda Carson's heart. With the adaptability of a pioneer she accepted the fact of death; even that of her husband's. The last two long Martian years had tested Terry's and her love; refined it with hardships and discouragement. The menacing gun was an easy way to rejoin him. But it was too easy; too soft a response to unwarranted killing. With unrelenting determination, she kindled and fanned to life a fierce resolve that the three men before her would pay, as slowly and as painfully as possible, for what they had done.

Through lips necessarily stiff with the effort of controlled emotion, she asked, "Why did you kill him?"

"Didn't have anything against him, Ma'am. Had to do it. Showed we meant business. Easier to handle one than two of you anyway." The eyes of the tubby man who answered her kept flickering


POISON

anxiously upward toward the Sand Vulture. "That thing as dangerous as they say?"

Leeda turned to the third and youngest man. His glance was fixed hypnotically on the death on the ground. His skin was pale and his forehead beaded with sweat. She repeated, "What did you do it for?"

"Got into trouble at Canalport. Heard a rumor that you and your husband had struck a pocket of Martian Sunbursts. Fixed up a deal with a ship's cargo master to smuggle us back to Earth if we turned your stuff over to him. He jetted us out here. Left a while ago." The fat man itched frantically as he answered her. They all itched, Leeda noticed. It took a long time on Mars before anyone became used to the dust that penetrated even the Protecto-suits. It produced an agony that demanded attention; followed by festering sores.

"You talk too much, Fatso," the tall one said angrily.

"What's the difference, Rick?" Fatso said philosophically. "Won't do her any good."

Rick turned to Leeda. "At least you know the score. Do you want to tell us where the stuff is, or are you going to make it tough on yourself?"

Eyes like a Razor-back Sand Lizard, Leeda thought. "Out by our diggings," she answered readily. His eyes moved to the plastic bubble-house that she and Terry had called home when they weren't digging. "Search the place if you don't believe me," she suggested. "We never brought any of them back here with us. We cached them in the cave until we were ready to go home."

"Then you did strike it?" the young man interrupted eagerly.

She nodded.

Rick turned to the young man. "Search the house, Jocco. She may be lying."

The Sand Vulture wheeled and made a few low exploritory swoops toward them as they waited for Jocco. Leeda automatically checked her clothing to be sure she was completely covered. If that barbed tail touched the skin, death came —slow, agonizing, sure.

Jocco came back. "Emptier than interstellar space."

Holstering his gun, Rick started off saying, "Let's go. And no funny stuff."

Leeda smiled ironically and remained where she was. "It's not that easy. The cave is four walking days away."

Startled, Fatso groaned. "Where's your sand-mobile?"

"Broken down at the diggings. We came back to get parts."

Fatso and Jocco cussed loudly. Rick quieted them. "Get the parts," he told Leeda.

"You bring any water?" she asked.

"You haven't any?" Fatso's voice rose shrilly.

Leeda reached to her waist and the small attached flask. "Just this. And Terry has—had—one just like it. Enough for a couple old-timers like us. Not near enough for everyone now. Particularly with you being new to Mars."

Jocco snatched the flask from Terry's waist.

"I'll take that, Jocco," Rick commanded. "And yours too," he gestured to Leeda.

She handed it over obediently.

"But, Rick," Fatso began.

"No arguments. Share and share alike. I'll dole it out. Now get the parts," he told Leeda. "You go with her, Fatso."

As soon as they were back, the men began to move off. For the first time Leeda lost control of herself. "For God's sake, aren't you going to at least bury him?"

Rick's face twisted with its wry grin as he walked back to her. "Give the Sand Vulture a break. He's got to eat."

"But . . ." she began to protest.

Swiftly he was beside her, doing something to her fingers. The pain surged up her arm; brought her stomach up into her throat gaggingly.

Then he released her. Gave her a shove. "When I say move, that's what I mean. Get going."

THE COLD, dry Martian air sucked the moisture irresistably through the skin and suits. As the day slid slowly by, the ever near horizon stayed practically featureless. The red sand bored like Calisto hornets into the skin.

Lips began to crack. Twice they stopped to sip the water. The second time, Rick looked at her. "How the devil do you know where we are?"

"Maybe I don't," she taunted.

"You'd better. We've no way of checking on you. But if you double-cross me, I'll strip your clothes off and leave you to the first Sand Vulture that comes along. Understand?"

"Don't worry," she answered, "I know the way. I've covered it often enough. There are many little landmarks if you know what to look for."

When evening came, Rick let each of them barely wet their lips. Then he said, "I need sleep and I can't trust anyone. So I'm going to hide the water in the desert. If anything happens to me,

you'll all die of thirst. Now turn your backs."

Leeda heard him scramble off. He soon returned. "Now let's sleep."

The below-zero cold of the Martian night challenged the thermo-unit of Leeda's desert suit until she lay shivering. But, worn out from the walk and the emotional events of the day, she finally dropped off to sleep.

It was still dark when she awoke. Deliberately making a noise, she listened for someone to challenge her. When no one moved, she slipped off into the desert.

It took her several hours at a rapid pace to get back to the bubble-house. Terry's Protecto-suit lay scattered over a wide area. His bones gleamed faintly in the barely discernable Martian moonlight—picked clean by the Sand Vulture and Razor-back Lizards.

Flinging herself on the sand, she poured out her grief with dry, racking sobs. The power to cry had long since been sucked out of her by dehydration.

Rising at last, she gathered together the things she had come for. When, at last, she returned to the night's camp, the three men were still fast asleep.

Next morning, while they sat munching the tasteless emergency food tablets that were carried in the desert, Rick went after the water. Suddenly his cussing rolled across the desert toward them. Leeda smiled quietly.

He came back at a half-run. Disgustedly, he flung the flasks at their feet. The sides had gaps ripped in them. "What nitwits," he cursed. "Naturally, the cold froze the water. When it expanded, it tore the flasks apart. You knew this would happen," he accused Leeda.

"Of course," she admitted.

Fatso struck her across the shoulders, knocking her onto the sand.

"None of that, Fatso," Rick commanded. "We need her worse now than ever. Is there any water near?" he asked Leeda

"About two days away. And then it's a gamble whether it will be good to drink. Sometimes the water following the strata from the pole hits a pocket of mineral that's poison. When that happens, The Explorers Guild puts up a Death's Head Sign to warn anyone from drinking it. As you know, they check every water source regularly."

"Is it far from your strike?" Jocco asked.

"About a day's walk."

"Any water at your cave?" Rick questioned.

"None. We didn't use much. And when we did need a supply,

we got it from the outcropping I've mentioned and took it back and distilled it."

"Well, we've got to head for the spring," Rick decided. "And it better be good water," he warned Leeda. "If it isn't and we've got to die out here, I'll see that you never bring in those Sunbursts either."

THEY PLODDED voicelessly after Leeda. She set as fast a pace as she dared. Even then Fatso began to drift back.

"Keep up, damn you," Rick warned. "If you don't, we'll leave you here alone."

Midway through the morning, Jocco burst out. "Look at her. Fresh as a Venusian pool lily. She must have some water on her."

Grimly they searched Leeda. She stiffened against their invading fingers and smiled at them derisively. "I told you that a veteran doesn't need water like you do."

Rick took her arm and twisted it until she crumpled with a cry onto the sand. His voice was full of suspicion. "What a fool I've been. Why didn't you abandon us last night when you had the chance?"

Shrugging out of his grasp, she rose and turned to him, "I wouldn't miss the pleasure of seeing you all die for all the Sunbursts on Mars."

She strode away at a faster pace than before.

It was about six hours after they had been on the way that Fatso stopped and began to yell. "Damn dust. Grinding right into my guts. Gotta scratch." He ripped and tore at his clothes until his stomach was bare. With a look of unutterable satisfaction, he began to itch and dig.

The SWOOOOSH could hardly be picked up. There was a long shadow; then a scream from Fatso. The Sand Vulture's tail came out of his belly red. Then the Vulture was away; circling high and out of range.

Blindly Rick pulled his gun and fired. Fast as his trigger finger was, the poison was faster. By the third shot Fatso began to scream. His voice rose up the scale of torture; bursting occasionally in a paean of agony. And as he screamed, he lay on the ground writhing. Before their eyes, his stomach began to bulge and turn purple from the poison. His eyes rolled up into his head. And the moans began to dribble from his lips like the litany of an insane chorus.

"I can't stand it," Jocco shouted. "How long will it last?"

"Not long enough," Leeda an-

swered, her voice brittle with satisfaction. "Only about ten hours. And in that time he will become mindless, an animal begging for death; then finally, he'll just grovel there moaning, and moaning, and moaning."

"You wanted this to happen to him," Jocco accused.

Leeda looked at him. "And I hope the same for you—only worse."

"Stop it, you two," Rick commanded. "It's bad enough this way. The living must live. He is dead and he doesn't know it. Why let him suffer?"

"More meat for the Sand Vulture," Leeda suggested sarcastically.

The scar on Rick's cheek flared red-purple. He leveled his gun slowly, with steady aim. After the trigger was pulled, Fatso stopped moving. "More meat for the Sand Vulture," he answered Leeda. "Now let's move."

THE RED DUST whispered at Leeda all day—Death—Death—Death. Even with a pebble in her mouth to suck on, she felt her lips split and wrinkle. Her blood, sweet in her mouth, was welcome moisture. She set her shoulders forward and plodded through the endless sand and pebbly underfooting.

Toward evening Jocco stumbled and fell several times. At last he lay limply; looking to Leeda and Rick pleadingly. His lips moved slackly until he at last managed to croak, "Gotta rest. Can't go on. Please don't leave me."

Rick mouthed his reply thickly. "I'm pretty beat myself. Let's rest."

Leeda flopped to the sand without an answer. Her mouth was full of tongue. The pebble she had been sucking feeling like a file against her lips. Every muscle ached; every cell screamed for moisture.

After a long, wordless rest, Rick hauled himself to his feet and faced Leeda. "Can't trust you now. You'll sneak off and leave us alone."

Leeda looked at him scornfully. "Don't worry about that. I meant what I said. I want to see you die."

"Still got to watch you," Rick replied. He turned to Jocco. "You get some sleep first. I'll watch her. Later I'll wake you to take over."

Leeda molded a hip hole in the sand and settled down. The night cold had long descended when the two men changed shifts. All through his trick, Rick had sat facing her. She lay quietly, simulating sleep. At last Jocco began to nod and doze. For a while he

managed to jerk himself awake; but he finally fell over and slept.

Cautiously she crept over to him and shook his arm. He didn't stir. Satisfaction touched with grim humor warmed her internally as she bent over him and removed his boots. She moved with them off into the desert. Satisfied at last that she was far enough from camp, she heaved the boots into the desert darkness.

She wasn't gone long, but even so she had barely settled down again when she heard Rick shake Jocco, "Wake up, you fool. I'd like to kill you for this. The girl could have crept off and you wouldn't have known it."

"I'm sorry, Rick. But I'm tired. I couldn't help it."

Rick began to cuss but stopped. "What's the use. Go back to sleep. I'll finish your watch."

IT WASN'T until they were ready to move the next morning that Jocco noticed that his boots were missing. He turned to Leeda. "You stole them."

"Don't be a damned fool," Rick answered. "She was watched all night. You probably had a nightmare and heaved them out into the desert. Let's look."

Leeda watched them search in an ever widening circle. Limping and still bootless, Jocco moved with Rick back to the camp.

"You'll have to try it as is," Rick was saying as they came close.

"But I can't," Jocco whined. "The dust almost drove me crazy with them on. What will I do this way?"

"That's your problem," Rick said callously. "Come or stay here alone. It's up to you." He turned to Leeda, "Glad to see you look so lousy this morning. At least you are suffering some, too. If you're telling the truth, we'll be at the pool tomorrow."

They were on the way about a half hour when the sand around Jocco's feet began to boil. Almost immediately his voice rose shrilly and then disappeared except for twitchings on his cheeks and lips.

"What's wrong, Jocco?" Rick asked.

"His feet," Leeda said laconically.

It looked as though Jocco was sinking into the sand. Then the red stains spreading into the sand told a different story.

"Razor-back Lizards," Leeda informed Rick. "They're all over the place. Come to life during the day when it's a little warmer. Our footwear keeps them off. But Jocco's feet haven't any protection so they can get at him. They'll slice away at him a fraction of an

inch at a time. In fifteen minutes there won't be anything left but his suit and a skeleton. Pleasant death, eh Rick? But after all, they do have to eat, as you have said."

Jocco toppled and lay twitching on his side; the legs of his Protecto-suit apparantly buried in the sand. The pants legs were strangely deflated except for the twisting and squirming of the unseen Lizards as they ate their way into the upper part of the suit. It took less than fifteen minutes. At the end, Leeda looked away. Once, long ago, she had watched in horror as the blood-colored tide burst into the helmet of a prospector friend of Terry's and hers. It was a sight that she had seen many times later in nightmares. Now as she imagined it, she heard Rick suck in his breath sharply and say hoarsely, "No! No!"

"Shall we be moving on?" she asked at last. The suit filled only with fleshless skeleton, lay deflated on the ground.

Rick's face was a dull sandy yellowish hue. He nodded and turned off into the desert without a word.

That third day was shooting pains, a chest that protested with every step, legs that could not be felt but somehow magically functioned. Many times Leeda was ready to quit. She began to stagger and weave erratically across the sand. The only thing that kept her going was the obsession of revenge that seemed to provide a limitless source of power whenever she seemed weakest. And Rick was getting bad; he seemed about finished. How he managed to keep moving, Leeda could not imagine. He fell repeatedly; but pulled himself doggedly back to his feet and stumbled after her.

When she flopped to the sand toward nightfall, he gestured her to her feet. And when she failed to get up, he came over and dragged her roughly erect. "Can't stop —never get up—gotta keep moving—until we die—or get there. Move!"

But the Martian night accomplished what she could not. Landmarks became indistinquishable; they soon would have been lost.

Lying down, Leeda adjusted her head-bubble so that it became opaque; conserving the warmth that leaked off so rapidly from a transparent object.

At long intervals she tried to move away from Rick who had settled right beside her. But each time his hand grabbed her firmly, forcing her back to the sand. He apparently intended to stay awake all night so she wouldn't sneak off.

WHEN THE MORNING of the fourth day arrived, they rose and once more moved stiffly, without a word for one another, across the wastes on the route that Leeda had selected.

Without quite knowing how it had happened, Leeda twice found herself on her knees on the sand. She knew she had been staggering; that her strength had long past left her; yet she was still amazed that her legs would not do the bidding of her mind. Each time she fell, Rick jerked her roughly to her feet and supported her until her legs moved automatically again.

His eyes were red-rimmed; his lips a ghastly slash of scabs and sores. About mid-morning he began to mumble incoherently, as though his voice alone could keep him sane. The only recognizable word that slid through his lips was, "Water! Water!"

It beat like the tone of a bass Callisto Satan Temple drum on Leeda's strained mind until she began to vision waterfalls and huge cakes of ice on the desert before her. Reality and imagination became mixed until she wondered if there was a place called Mars and if the past few days were real.

And it became noon; then mid-afternoon.

Suddenly the water-hole appeared as a dark spot on the featureless landscape before them. Distinguishable only by the lichens that surrounded it.

They both broke into a shuffling, jerky trot. Leeda was yards behind Rick when he reached the mud-hole. Instead of flinging himself down to the moisture, he stiffened, then his voice broke into a babbling cackle. He pointed to the perma-metal sign staked in the watery mud. A Death's Head stood embossed on its surface; the Interplanetary symbols for DEATH etched into the age-resisting metal.

Then his hand moved like doom to the skeleton that lay, head touching the red mud, on the edge of the hole.

Ignoring Leeda completely, his voice broke into a hideous singsong of wild laughter; and the word, "Poison," tumbled endlessly from his throat.

He stopped abruptly and turned to the desert. The lines of agony on his face smoothed out and the old sardonic grin twisted its way to his cheeks. Only his eyes gleamed madly. With a tremendous effort, he said loudly, "Water! There. Only a little way off."

And he staggered off into the desert, his arms extended eagerly, his hands fluttering aimlessly.

Leeda watched him go. Watched him chase his mirage out into the Martian wastes that extended for hundreds of miles without the slightest trace of water. Watched him stagger into oblivion until he became small with the distance.

Kneeling, she pushed the mud aside in the water-hole forming a small trough into which the red water could seep. Then she advanced the gauge on her head-bubble until she was breathing almost pure oxygen. Patiently she breathed in the mixture. After fifteen minutes, she removed the head-bubble and bent her lips to the accumulated water. Her oxygen saturated system would easily permit her to go a full ten or more minutes without having to take a breath.

Twice she lay back and let the water regain its level. Then drank. Satisfied at last, she placed the head-bubble once more onto its flange in the suit.

Rising, she pulled the poison sign from the mud and carried it over to the skeleton. There she eased herself to the sand and gently placed her hand on the head of the skeleton.

"We did it, Terry," she said gently. There was triumph in her voice; a feeling of peace and wholeness once more inside her. "The fools thought they could beat us. Four days to make an easy five hour walk. Circling; around and around. Waiting. Waiting and planning. and killing. Now they are dead and I can give you a decent burial.

"Forgive me, my Darling for moving you over here that first night. But I needed the sign and you to get even. Thanks for your help."

THE END

★ *Power - Old and New* ★

ELECTRIC POWER and hydraulic power are familiar to everybody. But there is a power source far older, which receives wide application and which is going to become more prominent. It is the power of compressed air.

Compressed air is widely used in industry because it involves no fire hazard, is cheap and simple in application and can be used to work very fast motors. But it is coming into prominence now in aircraft and rockets - - it's used to power the servomechanisms that work the control surfaces and manifold gadgetry with which these birds are laden.

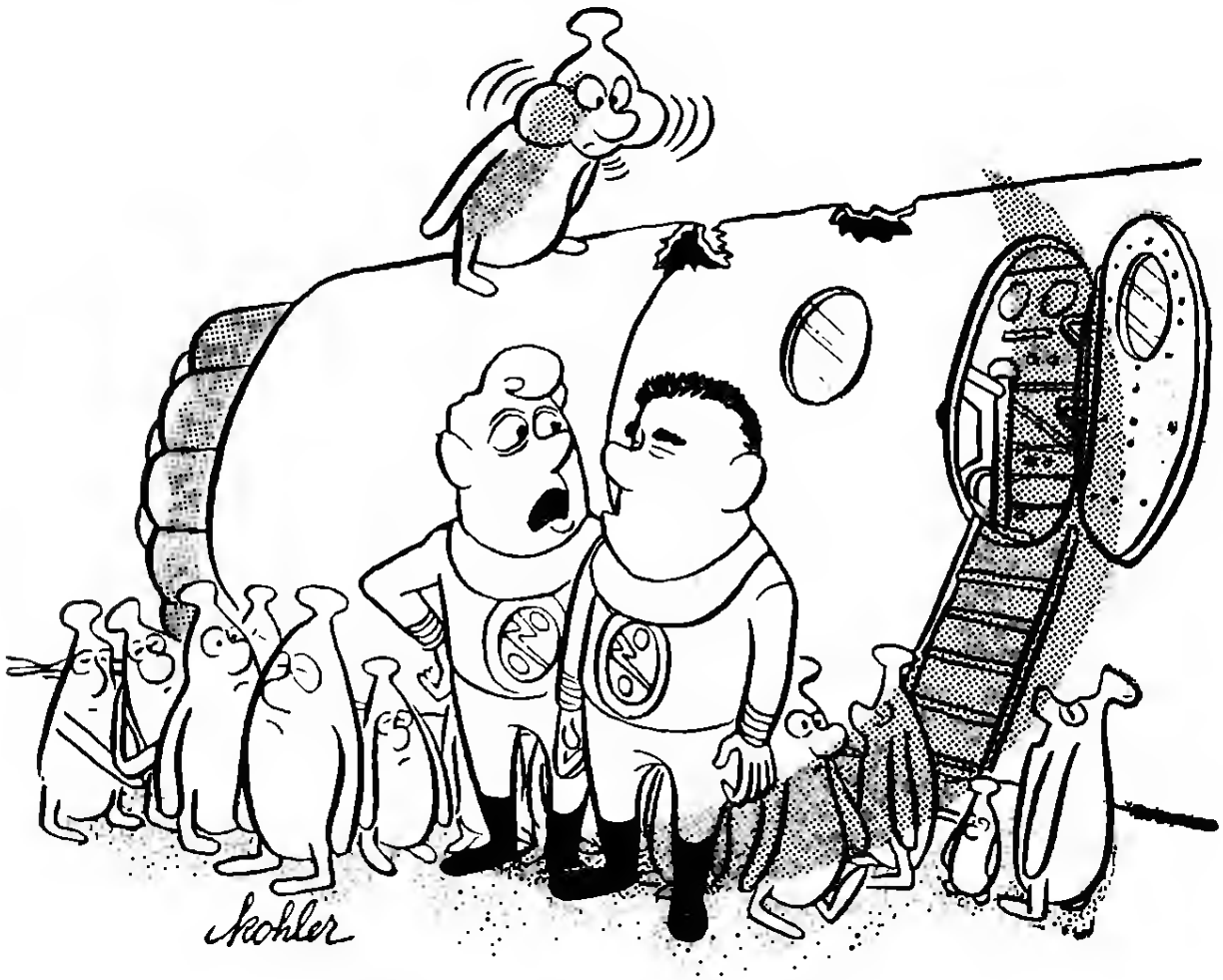
The air-powered motor, either a simple piston affair or a rotary vane mechanism is as reliable as a bow and arrow. There is nothing complex to make the motor go

wrong.

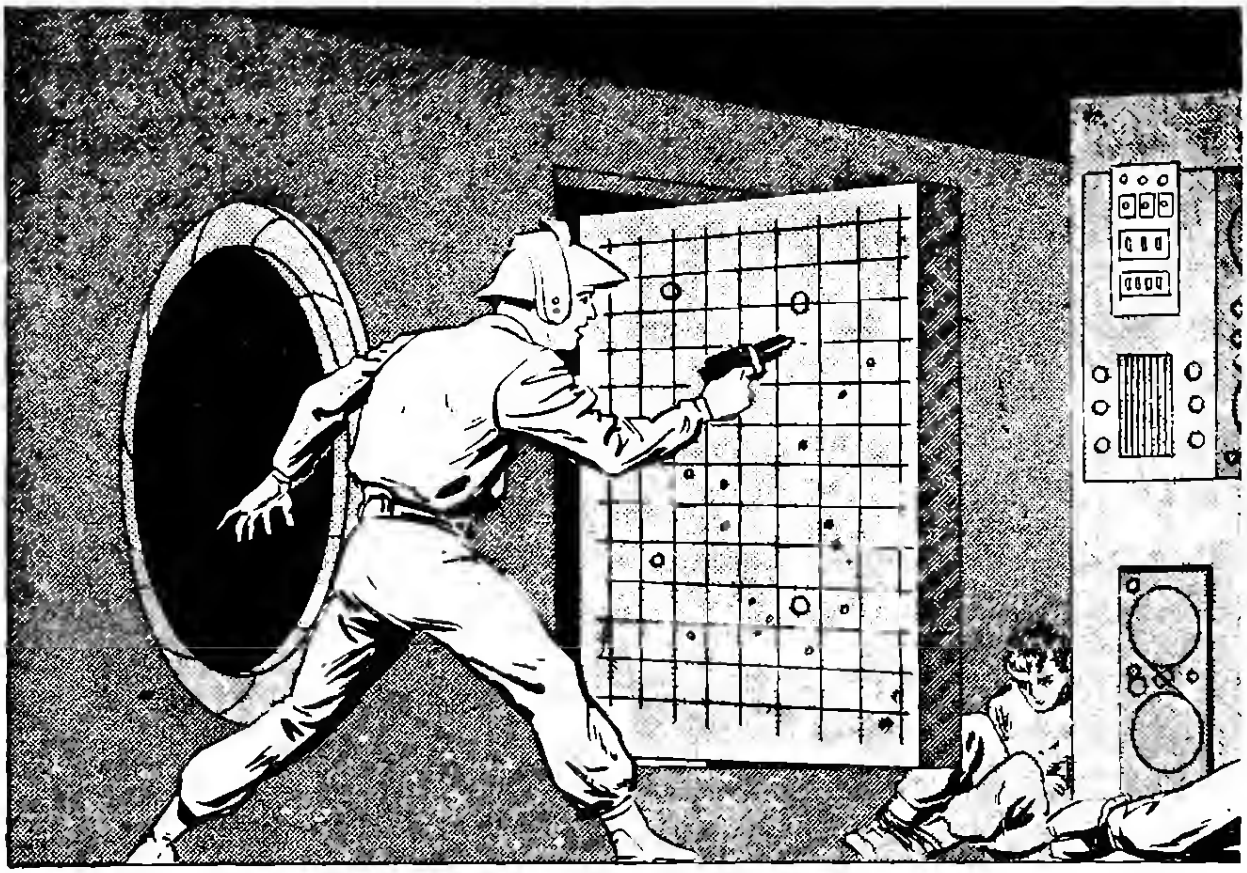
But what is most remarkable about the use of compressed air is the way in which it can be controlled to give what is called "proportional action." That is, for each control pressure a desired position of a ram or piston is necessary. To provide these pressures you simply allow air to flow from an orifice; the orifice is connected to a high pressure air source through a tiny restriction and also to the motor which is to be controlled. Then by manipulating a flapper over the orifice, by controlling the amount of air which bleeds from it, you control the pressure admitted to the motor. And of course the rocket vanes or aircraft control surfaces move in perfect synchronization with the flapper motion.

This ingenious principle is receiving wide application. The high pressure power necessary is provided already in every rocket - - compressed gases.

The Aborigines used compressed air to start a fire - - by smashing down on a piston in a bamboo tube. Man uses the same forces today to guide rockets!



"I just hope none of them starve until we can determine their eating habits."



Conroy found himself shanghaied to certain death in the radiation chamber of Earth's Wheel in space—as the planet below faced doom from—

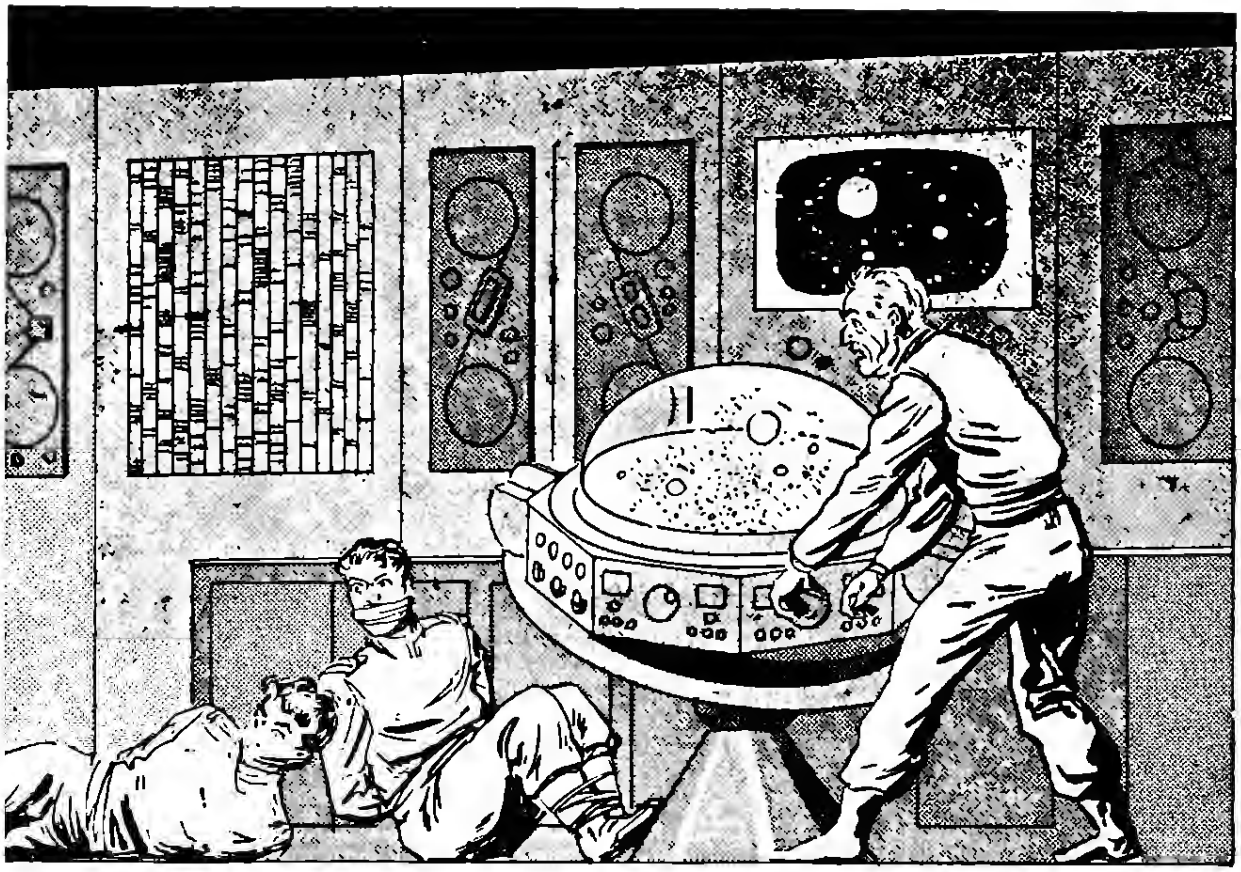
A Madman On Board

by

Robert Silverberg

THROUGH THE CLEAR plexiplast viewing dome of Earth Satellite V2-ZF, the bright orb of Earth could be seen, full and lustrous green against the sharp blackness of space.

But Dave Conroy wasn't able to feel much pleasure in the view. As he waited, hands linked with duralloy chains, he knew only that



somehow he had landed in trouble—trouble that would probably cost him his life, here among the beauties of the orbital satellite.

"Go on in, next batch," a bored voice ordered.

Dave began to move, along with the half-dozen stubble-faced disreputable-looking men he was chained to. They stepped through a permaluce door; it swung closed silently behind them.

"This is the entrance to the jetroom," a uniformed man facing them announced. "I'm Major Hawes. Welcome to Earth Satellite V2-ZF—you poor suckers!" An acid sneer tinted his voice.

"Hey, hold on!" the man next to Conroy shouted. "What's goin' to happen to us?"

Major Hawes smiled politely. "You'll be put to work in the jetroom of the Satellite, making sure our noble orbiting wheel stays warm and cozy. You'll be feeding radioactives to the converter. You'll be doing a lot of jobs robots could do twice as well, and after a year or so of it your bodies will start to rot and you'll fall apart and you'll get the deaths you deserve."

Hawes chuckled. "There'll be guards making sure you don't shirk. Inside, now—and your predecessors will show you what you're to

do."

The chains fell away. In here, no chains were needed. Dimly, Dave Conroy rubbed his forehead and wondered what he had done to condemn himself to this living hell.

"What kind of place is this?" he asked the man at his right, as a gleaming cupralloy door irised open before them.

"Is your mind snapping, buddy? You can't have forgotten so soon."

"I—I—it's all so hazy—"

"Hazy? It's simple, friend. You and me are four-time losers, like all these other guys. We got life imprisonment—but we volunteered for satellite duty instead. It's a quick death—only a year or so instead of a lifetime behind bars. And since there ain't no execution any more, we took it."

No—no—part of Conroy's mind protested. *I didn't volunteer. I never was in jail. . .except that drunken jetting once, and that was just overnight. How—why—?*

"That can't be right," he said. "I'm not a criminal."

The other man looked at him strangely, then smiled pityingly. "You musta been lookin' the wrong way when the recruiters came around, then. Those birds'll do anything for ten thousand bucks."

THEY CAME TO THE END of the long corridor and approached another door—and suddenly Conroy remembered.

He had been drunk, that last night on Earth—and suddenly everyone in the bar had run madly out the door, into the wash-room, hid anyplace they could. Two men had entered.

Recruiters. Space-station recruiters. Conroy remembered protesting mildly through a vague blue of alcohol and synthojoy, then letting them take him away. Sober now, he recalled having heard of such things. The space stations needed men—and they'd grab them any way they could. They'd take uncomplaining derelicts when the supply of convicts ran out.

His fiancee Janet had told him, when she broke their engagement, "Your drinking'll kill you some day, Dave." The words had been prophetic—though not the way she meant.

The final door opened—and eight shambling, patchy-fleshed, almost bald wrecks of men came toward them. Dave shuddered. This was what a year of continuous hard radiation could do, even through tough shielding. This was what he'd look like a year from now.

Already he imagined he could feel the subatomic particles ripping through his body, even though he knew it was only an illusion. The radiation wouldn't begin to affect

him for a few days—but even now he felt his skin tingling and itching from force of suggestion.

I've got to get out of here, he thought with a clarity he'd not known since he began drinking. *I'm still young. I don't want to rot down here.*

God, why couldn't I have been sober that night?

The eight jetmen looked like lepers. Through lipless mouths they greeted the newcomers. Their voices were dry and whispering, as if their vocal cords had succumbed to the radiation too.

Conroy had been a scientist. . . once. Conroy, more than any of the six convicts he had been shipped with, knew what sort of agonies lay ahead.

He turned. The door had irised shut behind him, erecting an invulnerable barrier between him and freedom.

He studied the door while the loathsome once-men greeted the men who would replace them at their deadly task. It looked fairly familiar; it was almost like—by space, it *was!*—an ultron-relay door.

A door Dave Conroy had helped to design, he and his partner Lloyd Regan, back before the terrible lab accident that had killed Regan and set Conroy to drinking.

Moving unobtrusively away from the group, he edged to the door. Yes—it *was* an ultronic door, he confirmed on close inspection. And that meant—

Hands that had once been those of a skilled engineer felt along the smooth metal for the emergency-hatch, found the microscopic depression built into the cupralloy for use in case the delicate ultronic mechanism of the door failed. His finger nestled in the slot for an instant—

And the door irised open.

"Hey!" he shouted, and jumped through. He heard the startled cries of the convicts.

"It's a trap," someone yelled. But another said, "Let's run for it"—and then the whole pack of them swarmed through the open door, Conroy in the lead.

THEY DASHED BACK up the long corridor and Conroy opened the other door by the same process. Then they were out in the main room again.

Major Hawes gasped in astonishment as he saw the ragged army sweep toward him. He drew his blaster, but one of the half-skeletonized veteran jetmen stumbled forward and took the bolt in his stomach, then kept going and wrapped decaying arms around the Major's throat.

Conroy's fist collided with the

mouth of a surprised Space-Station guard; his knuckles felt a sharp stab of pain, and teeth crumbled. Dave came up with a staggering blow to the guard's midsection and he fell.

That left two more to take care of. The lightning assault was still only seconds old. One of the guards was fingering the firing-stud on his blaster, but a man Conroy knew only as Pete sprang forward, wrenched the gun away, and dove into the guard.

Conroy grabbed the fallen gun, scooped it up and fired. His bolt spurted redly into the arm of the remaining guard.

Three more Space-Station men in gray uniforms came in, and Conroy and his little army swept forward to meet them. In the general confusion, Conroy's blaster was swept away—and, alone, unarmed, he slipped past the milling rebels and escaped into the corridor outside.

He found himself facing the giant viewing dome again, the curving arc of plexiplast that bellied out from the side of the satellite and afforded a striking view of the distant Earth. The orbiter was 100,000 miles above the Earth's surface—a sort of halfway-house between Earth and the Moon. From a hundred thousand miles up, the view was breathtaking.

Conroy glanced out at the sweeping circle that was Earth, green and shining in the sky. Just now, Africa and Europe were upturned, and the rippling mass of the Atlantic. A little tingle of wonder shot through Conroy at the sight of his home world, seen from the satellite he had helped to build.

Then he saw guards heading down the broad corridor that ran completely around the outer rim of the satellite, and knew he had to hide.

Quickly, he ducked into a washroom off to the right. As the door slid closed, he deftly jimmied the photonic beam to keep it that way until he was ready to come out.

He glanced at his face in the mirror, seeing as if for the first time the baggy eyes, the heavy growth of beard, the beaten, run-down color of the skin. The memory of a photo crossed his mind: a tridim in natural color, taken three years ago. He and Janet, together, their arms locked around each other, their faces bright, laughing.

Three years ago. Then came the accident; then the lab was destroyed and Lloyd killed. And then the drinking began.

Now, three years later, where was Janet? Someplace far off, remote, untouchable. Her father's party had taken over in the last election and he was now a bigwig

in the Space Commission. Probably she was still clean and fresh, bright and young. Maybe she was married.

And me? He looked with revulsion at the bleary mask his face had become.

He went to work with the depilator supplied in the washroom and rapidly wiped away his beard. Then he scrubbed his face the way it hadn't been scrubbed in months. He came out pink.

Stripping, he dropped his clothes in the Valet Hopper and stepped under the stinging spray of the shower. Robot hands scrubbed him down. Layers of dirt stripped away. An ion-massage set his blood pounding, broke down fatty tissue, left his skin tinglingly clean.

He surveyed his naked body in the mirror. Not bad, he thought. A long way from what it had been, but not bad.

He dressed rapidly. He was still wearing the clothes in which he had been picked up the night before—only now he fastened the collar magnesnap, adjusted the tie, straightened the trousers. When he was finished, he could pass for a tourist stopping off to see the satellite before making the jaunt to Luna.

Despite himself, he grinned. *They'll never recognize me in this disguise. They'll be looking for a hobo, not a clean cut young tourist.*

Feeling invigorated and dapper, he activated the door and stepped into the corridor.

STROLLING IN LEISURE, he walked to the viewing dome and peered out at Earth. A chubby matron stood next to him.

"Lovely, isn't it?" she said.

"It's quite a sight. This your first time?"

"Yes. It's all wonderful up here. I think it's marvelous that the satellite's been built!"

"It certainly is," Dave said, thinking of the radiation-eaten wretches somewhere in the lower levels of the big wheel.

Feeling a little sick to his stomach, he smiled and walked on. A grey-clad guard stood at the entrance to the Tourists' Lounge. Choking back his tenseness, Conroy walked up to him.

"Pardon me, officer—"

"Yes?"

"Could you give me some information? I'd like to know when the next liner leaves for Earth. I find I have to cut short my trip."

The guard frowned. "Liner service to Earth is temporarily discontinued, sir. Didn't you hear the notice?"

"What?"

"That's right," the guard said. "Emergency Provision 104b has

been put into operation. The Space Station is temporarily quarantined."

"Can you tell me why?" Conroy asked.

"Something to do with an inspection sir. That's all I can say."

Putting a tone of easy conspiracy in his voice, Conroy whispered, "I hear some convicts down below staged a rebellion a little while ago. This wouldn't have anything to do with it, would it?"

The guard shook his head in immediate denial. "Oh, *no,* sir. That was strictly a brief flare-up; it's all been smoothed over now."

"Oh. Thanks," Conroy said. "Thanks very much." He smiled to the guard and walked past him into the lounge.

So the "brief flareup" was all over with, eh? Obviously they were keeping it quiet as far as the passengers were concerned. Probably that guard was wondering how Conroy had heard of it in the first place.

But one thing seemed good: he hadn't been recognized. He just looked too respectable with all the dirt laundered out of his clothes and with his face shaven, to be one of the missing jetmen from below. That gave him a certain amount of freedom.

Only—whatever this quarantine thing was about, that increased the tension. He had hoped to grab the first liner back to Earth; now he'd have to wait until the quarantine ended and that gave the satellite guards a chance to track him down. He couldn't pose as a tourist forever, even aboard such a huge station as this one.

They'd find him sooner or later. Meanwhile, he needed a drink. He peered through the swirling dim lights at the bar, trying to see the barrender's face. Conroy was pretty good at guessing whether or not he could cadge a drink.

But there was a girl sitting at the bar, sleek and slim in a dress that had probably been sprayed on. Her legs were crossed, baring long, lovely calves. Her face—

Conroy gasped.

It was Janet.

FEELING A THUNDEROUS pounding in his ears, he crossed the floor and slid into the chair next to hers.

She hadn't changed. She was looking away, watching the pulsating vibromural on the opposite wall, and he studied her covertly in the backbar mirror. Her skin still had that clear, crystalline appearance; her eyes were bright and vigorous, her lips full, desirable. The dress *had* been sprayed on; it clung revealingly to the high breasts and slim body that Conroy had once thought would be his.

"Hello, Janet," he said.

A little startled, the girl turned away from the vibromural. "Do I know you? *Oh!*"— a little gasp—"Dave?"

"That's right. Dave."

She whirled on her chair to face him. "Oh, Dave, it must be years. *Years!*"

"Three years." There was no ring on her finger, he saw. "How have you been?"

"Fine," she said. "You've heard about Dad's new job, and—"

"How have *you* been?"

"A little lonely, sometimes," she admitted. "I've been working in Dad's office since I finished school. How about you? Did—did you ever get back into lab work?"

"No," he said hollowly. "I never did."

"What brings you to the Wheel?" she asked.

"I'm a tourist," he improvised. "Saw the sights on Luna, and now I'm on my way back to Earth." He moistened his lips. "How about a drink?"

"Fine!"

"Two martinis, please," he ordered. When the barkeep brought them, he said, "Charge them to Allied Technolabs' account. They'll take care of it."

"Right, sir."

Allied Technolabs had been the contractors that built the Space Station. Conroy hadn't been affiliated with them since the lab explosion—but if Janet noticed, she said nothing.

Conroy caressed the drink, sipped it thirstily.

"Are—you—"

"Still drinking?" he finished. "A little. Not as much. I'm leading a clean life." *It was a lie*, he thought bitterly. *But what else could I say?*

The martini warmed him—that, and the girl's presence. She reawakened all the old longing in him, filled him with dull anger at the way the past three years had been pulled from him—years he could have spent wed to Janet.

But she had broken the engagement, she had wanted no part of a seemingly incurable alcoholic. She was too good for him. He wondered how she'd feel if he told her he was also a fugitive from the jetgang belowdecks.

"What are you doing here on the Wheel yourself?" he asked.

Lowering her voice, she said, "I'm here with Dad. He's conducting a top-secret hush-hush investigation."

"Oh? Can you tell an old friend?"

She smiled sadly. "I really can't. It's upper-security doubleplus, if you know what I mean."

He chuckled. "You really take

your job seriously. I mean, if you can't tell—"

Reddening, she said, "Oh, okay, Dave. I guess you'll find out one way or another anyway. There's been a rumor that a saboteur's aboard the Space Station."

"What?" He started from his seat. "Then why'd he bring *you* here?"

"Shh! It's not dangerous here—this is the safest place. The rumor says the saboteur's going to get control of the satellite and bomb Earth! Washington's supposed to be first target!"

Conroy felt the color drain from his face. When they had built the satellite, this fear had been in everyone's mind—that, despite the world peace that prevailed, someday an alien power might use the satellite as an instrument of destruction. And now—

"You sure of this?"

"We're not sure of anything. That's why Dad's here. It's awfully dangerous, but as one of the Space Commissioners it's his responsibility to check on it. And he brought me along in case it was true; he didn't want me down in Washington if it was going to be bombed."

He leaned closer; the drink had gone to work, stirring his insides, warming him, emboldening him. "I'm glad he came here and brought you along," he said. "Janet—"

"Please, Dave."

"Don't say it that way! I—"

He paused, feeling a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at the stony face of a Space Station Guard.

"Are you David Conroy?" the guard asked.

"WHAT IF I AM?" Conroy asked stiffly.

"Major Hawes wants you, Conroy. The penalty for escaping from—"

He was out of his seat in an instant, cutting off the guard's words before Janet could hear them. He could see her pale, frightened face. She shrank back.

"I'm not the man you want!" he snapped.

"That doesn't matter. Come with me, Conroy."

The guard reached out for him. Conroy responded with a short choppy blow to the gray-clad midsection, and as the man grunted Dave swung a roundhouse right that sent him wobbling back against a table of noisy tourists.

The table went over; glassware shattered tinklingly and angry voices could be heard. In the crowded lounge, people turned to watch the brawl.

He heard Janet's cry. "Dave! What's happening?"

The guard rose from the heap of dishes and bottles, and Conroy ran toward him. They locked, and Conroy knocked him back again. The guard didn't dare fire in these close quarters.

Instead he grabbed a champagne bottle from a nearby table and hurled it at Conroy. Dave ducked; the bottle sped over his head and crashed into the mirror back of the bar.

Conroy saw several more guards entering the lounge, and ducked back behind another table.

They came toward him. Patrons of the lounge huddled back out of the way. As the three guards approached, Conroy upended the table, tossing to the floor a shower of half-filled plates, and hurled it at them.

It knocked them back. Nimbly he sprinted past them, only to meet four more entering the lounge.

By now almost everyone in the lounge was up and swinging; Dave had no idea where Janet was, but he hoped she was gone.

His fist struck a gray uniform just as a hand clubbed down numbingly on his shoulder. He shook the blow off, pile-drove his way through the confused, milling pack of people, and headed for the exit.

Once again he was in the corridor. An alarm now wailed through the Wheel; Conroy, half out of breath, dashed pantingly along the metal floor, hearing the dull chonking sound of his feet as he ran.

Run. Run. That was the only thought in his mind. They were hunting him, wanted to stick him back in the jet section to rot into a mindless hulk of neutron-blasted protoplasm, and he was running away.

The endless wheel of the Space Station opened out before him. He knew he would have to turn off somewhere, else he would come full circle and run smack into guards again.

He passed a washroom, toyed with the idea of entering it, then rejected the strategem. No sense blockading himself in there; they'd only starve him out once they found out where he was. No. He needed some more strategic hiding-place until this blew over.

The thought of what Janet had said drifted through his mind. A saboteur aboard the Station—threatening to bomb Washington.

Just another wild rumor, probably, though it certainly needed checking. But—

The control center! he thought. *What if I hide there— and threaten to destroy the station if they don't release me from serving in the jet-room?*

They'd have to grant him safe-conduct; he'd broadcast his appeal over a world-wide circuit to the planet below. It would cause a global scandal once the world learned how recruits for the jetroom were found.

He racked his memory for location of the control center, finally found the blueprint in his mind and searched it. Designs that he'd forgotten along with the rest of his engineering career came back.

He doubled along his track, found a side-corridor, ran down it. The way to the control center was along lateral spoke eleven, to the heart of the Wheel.

The corridor was clear. He ran desperately.

IT SEEMED LIKE an endless corridor, but eventually he reached the ultronic door that led to the control center. As he expected, a poker-faced guard stood there.

"Sorry, no one's allowed in, sir. Commissioner Merrill is in there and—"

Commissioner Merrill? Janet's dad? That complicated things. But he had to get inside.

"Will you tell Commissioner Merrill it's urgent that I see him. It's about his daughter. Some drunk in the Tourist Lounge tried to attack her, and—"

"Of course, sir." The guard turned to press the relay that would open the door, and Conroy clubbed down on the back of his neck with the side of a fist.

The man shuddered under the blow, began to reach for his blaster, and Conroy hit him again. He fell heavily.

Thoughtfully, Conroy extracted the blaster from the guard's holster, then reached up and slid his hand over the wall, searching for the ultronic relay that he himself had designed so long ago. The door irised open.

Conroy stepped inside. No one was visible in the outer room; no sound was heard except the continual chattering of the cybernetic governors that operated the satellite. He let the door close and activated the lock. No one would get in until he was ready to let them in, now; it was a circuit known only to the builders of the station and the high officers.

The first thing was to find Merrill, and anyone else who might be in the control center. Conroy knew what he had to do: take charge of the control center, broadcast his terms to the Space Station and to Earth, and wait for them to agree to release him. If they called his bluff—

He shivered. No, they'd never do that. If he threatened to destroy the Station they'd grant him freedom without hesitation. In a situation like that, you don't try to call a madman's bluff.

Conroy slid open the door that led to the inner room that was the nerve center of the giant station. He looked in—and gasped.

Commandant Naylor and several other men in high-rank uniforms lay bound in one corner of the cabin. And at the controls of the Station was Commissioner Merrill.

He seemed to be chuckling to himself. Conroy paused by the door and watched, horror-stricken.

Merrill had activated the long-dormant bombay units, and, according to the pattern on the radar screen above his head, he had swung a fusion-bomb onto the hoists.

The bombs were kept at the Station—in case. They were strictly top-secret, stored on the satellite in the event that they would be needed in a war. Conroy knew about them only because he had seen the specifications for the satellite before it had been built; Merrill, as Commissioner, would also know about them.

And Merrill was aiming the deadly bomb square at Washington!

CONROY LIFTED his blaster, but knew he could never fire on Janet's father cold-bloodedly.

In a hoarse voice he said, "Have you gone mad, Merrill?"

"What—?"

Merrill turned. His face was so contorted by emotion that Conroy barely recognized it; the man's eyes were bright and glinting as if he were possessed.

He had been sent here to search out a saboteur—but how could he do that, when he himself *was* the saboteur?

"Conroy! How did you get in here?"

"Get away from those controls," Conroy ordered, his throat dry. "If you make a move toward them I'll blast you down."

Don't call my bluff, he prayed. *Don't!*

All Merrill had to do to release the bomb was to trip a cryotonic relay; fiery death would descend on Washington within minutes. Stiffly Conroy moved toward him.

"Keep your hands in the air, Merrill."

A blaster lay to one side—the blaster, no doubt, with which Merrill had overpowered the Wheel's officers. Conroy edged toward it.

And then Merrill put his head down and charged desperately to-

ward Conroy.

Dave's hand wavered on the gun for a moment; he still could not fire. Cursing, he hurled the blaster to one side and met Merrill's charge.

The Commissioner was in his fifties, but heavyset and muscular. He tore into Conroy with a madman's fury. Gasping from a stomach blow, Conroy reeled backward, locked his hands, brought them down with all his force on Merrill's bull-like neck.

Forget he's Janet's dad, he ordered himself. *Hit him or he'll kill you.*

He drove his fists mercilessly into the Commissioner's bulk. Merrill kept coming in his suicide attack. Finally Conroy crashed a fist into the older man's jaw, and he sagged to the ground.

"Thank God!" Commandant Naylor exclaimed, wrestling in furious impotence with his bonds. "That madman was about to bomb Washington!"

"I know," Conroy said tiredly. "I know."

LATER, HE HELD a sobbing Janet Merrill in his arms, felt her soft warmth against him, soothed her as she wept.

"Easy, baby. Your Dad'll be all right once the psych-crew calms him down. He had space-sickness; it can happen to anyone. He went out of his mind temporarily—and instead of preventing the saboteur from bombing, he *became* the saboteur!"

"But the disgrace—"

"It'll be hushed up," he said. "It could happen to anyone. When he comes out of it he'll forget the whole thing."

She started to calm. "And what about you?"

Chuckling, he said, "You don't think they're going to condemn me after all this, do you? I had a talk with the Commandant. They're going to investigate the whole filthy business of the jetroom and replace those men with robots. And I'm completely cleared."

"That's wonderful, darling," she said.

"*Darling—?*" he repeated. "But I thought—"

"I was a fool, Dave," she said. "I didn't have enough faith in you—*then.*"

"How about now?"

She looked up at him and wiped tears from her glittering eyes. "We've wasted three years, darling. When can we start making up for lost time?"

THE END



"Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . ."



Conducted by Robert Bloch

WRITING A TOPICAL column some four months in advance of publication is a bit like writing in the dark—as some of you have probably noticed. I'm not complaining, mind you. That's what we have readers for; let *them* complain.

But in the field of science fiction fandom a great deal can happen in four months. During such a stretch of time a new fan can emerge, publish a fanzine, grow disenchanted, and gafiate. Prozines can cease publication and disappear. Eagerly-awaited projects can materialize—or fall through completely.

As a result, the smart fan columnist sticks to generalizations. It has often been asked why, for example, I am always ribbing Bob Tucker. The answer is simple; he's dependable, he's always around for the purpose. If I were to arbitrarily select another target, I might find that by the time my scurrilous remarks appeared in print, he was already out of fandom and on his way to a lawyer to sue me for libel.

So, as I said, generalizations are the order, or disorder, of the day. Numerical fandom, the Sense of Wonder, that sort of thing, are the columnist's stock in trade.

Therefore I'm deeply conscious of the risk involved when I venture to make a few random remarks concerning the 1958 Convention—since, at this writing, the 1957 Convention has not yet been held, kicking and screaming, in London.

It is a knotty problem. Nevertheless, and knot withstanding, a number of fans have questioned me about this, and I intend to offer a few remarks. (I would have written "*Venture* a few remarks" but the editor doesn't allow me to advertise rival magazines.).

Just about a year ago I stuck my neck out and suggested that our annual Conventions explore the possibilities of relieving their committees of some of the burdens and responsibilities by employing a professional, paid secretary. The notion was submitted solely for discussion purposes. My main objective was to stir up some interest in what I felt was a very real problem, and to emphasize just how much time and effort goes into the mounting of a full-scale Science Fiction Convention.

As of this writing, no one has apparently explored this particular possibility; but a number of fans have asked for other opinions on just what might help to make Conventions run a bit more smoothly for both sponsors and spectators.

Several questionnaires have been circulated in various quarters. Results of such opinion-sampling might be helpful if they were now available—but as I remarked, this column is written in the dark, and as yet I've not seen any reports on such polls.

So that's the situation. I don't know, at this writing, how things will go in London. I don't know who will get the Convention in 1958. I don't know what plans are under way for its presentation.

All I can do, under the circumstances, is offer a few of my own random observations which may or may not spark a few ideas on the part of future Convention committees.

First of all, there's the little matter of air-conditioned halls.

This sounds like a pretty small quibble, doesn't it? Most hotels just don't have such facilities available, and besides, are fans such sissies that they can't put up with a few days of discomfort? So runs the counter-argument.

To which I reply, there *are* such facilities available in the more modern hotels of most cities, and sitting, sweat-soaked and soggy, in the equivalent of a steam-bath, doesn't prove anyone's manhood—or improve it, either. It is a matter of solid scientific, Campbellian fact that a combination of high temperature and high humidity reduces the physical and mental capacity of any individual; particularly his capacity for enjoyment. And if we don't go to Conventions to enjoy them, why not save our money and swelter at home?

I've seen more programs dismissed as "dull" and more carefully planned projects fall through than I care to think about—and this, it is my conviction, merely because the weather was the villain. People grow impatient and irritable when subjected to the stress of barometric pressure. Their performance, as participants or audience, suffers. A lot of this "skipping" of Convention programs is actually due more to the known discomfort of sitting in a humid hall than to the snobbish excuse that fans just can't be bothered to attend. It seems to me that unless a Convention can be held in comfort, there is little point in arranging an elaborate four-day program which only a small percentage of attendees will bother to witness.

This is more than just opinion; anyone who has ever been present at an Annual or Regional Convention during which the weather

made an abrupt change will bear witness to the abrupt change in Convention spirit. I've seen listless, apathetic fans drag their way through the first two days of such an affair and suddenly become revitalized when the thermometer and barometer offered relief. The transformation in terms of appreciation and enjoyment was quite dramatic.

But our summer Convention schedule can't depend on such boreal blessings or meteorological miracles. It *can* depend on air-conditioning. And I'm in hopes that future Convention committees will put down air-conditioned meeting-halls as a "must."

Now, as to what goes on in those meeting-halls.

Each Convention committee, of course, works with whatever program materials it finds available. But as a general thing, Science Fiction Conventions distribute their emphasis in four directions—on Science, on Fiction, on Business, and on Entertainment.

Under the heading of Science we encounter the speakers who come to us, often from outside fields, with a serious message. Under the heading of Fiction we get the addresses of writers and editors and publishers, the panels, the discussions by Serious, Constructive Fans, the critical analyses and reports on the field. Under the heading of Business comes the special meetings which consider Convention affairs; rules, resolutions, voting on TAFF and other projects, balloting for officers, balloting for the site of the next Convention, etc. Under the heading of Entertainment we get just about everything, including Ackerman. Masquerade, Banquet, ballet, skits, movies, etc.

Individual Convention committees have lined up their programs in a variety of ways. Roughly, these methods can be generally divided into two categories—the Mixture and the Compartment.

In the Mixture, we find the work of a committee that believes "Variety is the spice of life." Their typical afternoon program may consist of a speech on prozines by a prominent writer, an hour or two of Auction, a speech on rocket projectiles by a ballistics expert, and a fan-skit entitled HOW YNGVI SAWED COURTNEY'S BOAT.

Personally, I prefer the Compartment method. Whenever I've seen it in action, it seems to work out to the best advantage of all concerned.

For it's a perfectly obvious fact that many fans have individual tastes. Some prefer straight science, some are interested only in the science fiction and the producers thereof, some are just fan-oriented, some relish the business and the politicking, some want merely entertainment.

IF THE PROGRAMS are clearly demarcated into solid sessions where one element is stressed, everybody with such an interest can plan to attend at that time. All too often, looking over a line-up, the average fan sees only a single feature which appeals to him. He tries to calculate what time the feature will be "on" and then attempts to arrange his affairs beforehand so as to attend—

and makes a date to do something else immediately thereafter.

Unfortunately, not even a professional time-and-motion man can figure out just *when* a given event will actually occur at a Convention. Many times the fan misses his timing completely. In all cases, unless he's willing to sweat out the whole four or five hours in the hall, he'll contribute to the most disrupting spectacle of most Conventions by wandering in and out, back and forth, restless and inattentive. This is bad for his morale. It's bad for the morale of the rest of the audience. What it does to the earnest speakers or performers is murder.

How much simpler, then, for all concerned, is this matter of merely grouping events! All the fans interested in one category will assuredly plan to be present, and form an attentive audience. The others will plan their outside trips, their bull-sessions, their own parties to fill in. Nobody will be inconvenienced and everybody will benefit.

I do not believe it is humanly possible to plan a four-day program that will be uniformly interesting to *all* types of fans. And I don't believe *any* fan expects this. One or two full-fledged sessions devoted to his own major interests will be amply sufficient. But as it is, when a Mixture is offered, many fans get so bored waiting for their particular offering to come along that they drift into the habit of staying away from all sessions—merely "looking in" from time to time. As a result, they're apt to get the impression that "the whole program was dull," and (this has happened to me, many times) miss a number of isolated events they had particularly planned on seeing.

So I respectfully suggest that Convention programs be planned in Compartments. Nobody loses, everybody gains.

A word about Banquets, now. Banquets cost too much. It has been so stated many times—and it has also been said that it's impossible to get the active cooperation of a big hotel and the use of its meeting facilities unless the Banquet is expensive. I am in no position to decide the matter.

I do know that, since 1953, in Philadelphia, there has been an increasing tendency on the part of some fans to just plain skip the Banquet entirely. So much so that by 1956, in New York, the Convention committee was forced to acknowledge this fact by throwing open the doors to the absentees after the meal, in order that they might hear the speeches. With complications, I might add, which pointed up the problem.

The problem remains. What's more, it has become intensified. Some neo-fans have actually lost sight of the fact that, originally, Banquets were avoided by people who couldn't afford the high prices or did not wish to pay them. They have adopted the somewhat quixotic rationalization that it's "smart" to skip the Banquet; that Real Fans Never Go To Banquets Anyway. At the same time, seemingly completely unaware of their inconsistency, they are apt to complain because a lot of the "good stuff" and "main events" take place at the Banquet.

Well, I think they're right about that last notion. A lot of the "good

stuff" and "main events" does take place at the Banquet—and it *should.* The Banquet is the high point of virtually every Convention of this sort, and it would be utterly ridiculous on the part of any committee to relegate the Guest of Honor, principal speakers, distribution of awards and other features to the disorder of an open meeting. In years past some such gambits have been tried. They were not, in my opinion, very successful. The Banquet, successfully conducted, is a gala event. If you can't afford the price, or feel that it's exorbitant and want to stay away in protest, that's one consideration and your privilege. But to rationalize by deploring the value of the institution itself seems a bit unrealistic.

The actual solution of this problem lies in the hands of future Convention committees. A reasonable compromise involving the nature of the meal and service and a decrease in price would be the ideal solution to strive for. And this, in turn, depends on individual circumstances in every instance.

As to Masquerades, and Auctions, and movie showings—these, I think, are successful features just because they are usually compartmentalized. Those who like 'em attend and are pleased; those who don't, stay away and find fun and games elsewhere.

As I said at the beginning, it's pretty difficult to anticipate what the situation may be four months from now when these words actually appear. But I'm reasonably certain there *will* be a 1958 Convention, and there *will* be a Committee. If so, I offer these rambling remarks for their consideration.

Now it's time to ramble on to a consideration of the current fanzines.

VARIOSO No. 14 (John Magnus, Embassy House, Oberlin, Ohio: irreg.: 10c) is a handsome, cleanly-composed job, with touches of color in the ink, paper, and writing. Terry Carr offers a double-spread of his "face-critturs" and there are other contributions, but the bulk of the issue is Magnusonian; provocatively opinionative or charmingly discursive, and always interesting. Magnus, Jack Harness and Ted E. White have also appended a separate one-shot publication called TRIPLE WHAMMY which was designed to accompany VARIOSO. The combination is one big answer to inflation—apparently, you can still get quite a lot for a dime; at least in fannish circles. Magnus, in yet a third enclosure, says that he plans to put VARIOSO back on a regular and frequent schedule—$1 will get you a longtime subscription.

YANDRO No. 54 (The Coulsons, 407½ E. 6th St., North Manchester, Indiana: monthly: 10c, 12/$1) comes out with embarrassing and gratifying regularity, and there are three items, among many interesting ones, which I consider exceptionally noteworthy. The first is a full-page ad for a MANIAC MAD BRAIN CONSTRUCTION KIT which is certainly one of the best ad-satires I've ever seen anywhere, and tops anything the MAD COMICS gang used to do. Items two and three consist of a lengthy article on Ray Palmer by Russ Wolf and a comment on same by Ray Palmer himself. Rest of the

issue shows no slackening of pace or enthusiasm.

SATA No. 7 (Bill Pearson, 4516 E. Glenrose Ave., Phoenix, Ariz.: quarterly: 25c) is almost a 40-pager, demonstrating a masterly use of color on the numerous and striking illustrations by Juanita Coulson, Bill Harry, Pearson, and associate editor Dan Adkins. As usual, emphasis here is on fan-fiction, but to my mind the drawings generally overshadow the text: this is one 'zine which shows signs of careful, patient production and a perfectionist outlook.

STELLAR (Ted White, 1014 N. Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, Va.: 5 times yearly: 15c, 5/50c) also places the emphasis of its big 50-odd-page issue on fan-fiction. But this happens to be fiction *about* fans which is written, in the main, by pros. Marion Zimmer Bradley, Harry Warner, Jr., Charles Burbee and Richard Eney are names to conjure with (I have it on good authority that the late Harry Houdini always used to whisper "Charles Burbee" under his breath whenever he got out of a straitjacket— or into one, for that matter) and the other contributions by Lee Hoffman, Jack Harness, Ted White himself and a pseudonymous Franklin Ford are up to the high standard of the issue as a whole. Mrs. Bradley, in particular, contributes a story about a Convention which packs quite a punch. She goofs, however, on one minor detail: she has a character named Bloch presiding over the opening session and introducing celebrities from the audience. If she were an inveterate Convention-goer, as I am, she would know that this Bloch character has trouble enough merely *getting* to the first session, let alone presiding over it: he is too busy making preliminary surveys—locating the bar, avoiding the house detective, and trying to line up an advance schedule of poker games. But aside from this quibble, it's quite a yarn.

METROFAN (David MacDonald, 101 W. 109th St., New York 25, N.Y.: monthly: 50c/12) is the unofficial publication of the Circle and the ESFA, two New York area science fiction clubs, and while it deals primarily with local affairs, it contains much of general interest. For example, this issue carries a Midwescon Report by Frank and Belle Dietz, and the beginning of a terrifically funny Shakespearean parody—THE TRAGEDY OF SAM MOSKOWITZ, by Ken Beale and editor MacDonald.

RETRIBUTION No. 7 (John Berry, 31 Campbell Park Ave., Belmont, Belfast, Northern Ireland: quarterly: 15c) is the latest in the series of magazines celebrating the mythical Goon Defective Agency invented by editor Berry and able assistant and illustrator Arthur Thomson. As in previous issues, the doings of Irish and English fandom are farcically fictionized and impishly illustrated. Not a 'zine for neo-fans, but richly rewarding to readers of HYPHEN and all the other publications from overseas. Such as:

PLOY No. 9 (Ron Bennett: US representative, Bob Pavlat, 6001 43rd Ave., Hyattsville, Md.: irreg.: 15c, 4/50c). This issue is worth the purchase price for the back cover alone. Bill Harry has come up with a masterpiece which captures the Sense of Wonder, to say noth-

ing of the sense of humor. But before you get to the back cover, you'll encounter Dave Jenrette, editor Bennett, John Berry, Terry Jeeves, Bob Coulson and others.

ORION No. 19 (Paul Enever, 97 Pole Hill Rd., Hillingdon, Middlesex, England: irreg.: exchange) has a co-editor, George Richards. One of the usually dependable Anglofanzines, this issue has been long delayed and the editor apologizes for the comparatively haphazard job. Still, there's an interesting article on the *Marie Celeste* mystery, a most amusing film review by Alan Dodd, plus another by Bill Harry, and enough to round out 25 pages.

TACITUM (Benny Sodek, 1415 S. Marsalis, Dallas 16, Texas: irreg.: no price listed) arrived here with only part of its 8th issue surviving the vicissitudes of mailing. But there was enough left for me to enjoy a very cute yarn by Carl Brandon and a minority view of Theodore Sturgeon's work by Noah McLeod.

Also out of Texas comes CRIFANAC No. 5 (Tom Reamy, 4332 Avondale, Dallas, Tex.: irreg.: 25c) which consists of 34 pages faced by a collage cover which would give a Freudian analyst quite a bit to think about. The editor, Ray Thompson, and Leif Ayen contribute three pieces of decidedly offtrail fiction with the accent on horror, and Lyn Venable pens an autobiographical sketch which is a model of modest reticence. But to this reviewer, the strongest impression is left by the various film reviews: I take off the top of my head to those brave souls who were willing to sit through hour after hour of what they report to be incredibly crude crud.

SKYHOOK No. 24 (Redd Boggs, 2209 Highland Place, NE, Minneapolis 21, Minn.: quarterly: 20c, 6/$1) is here again, and that's good news indeed. Formerly distributed through FAPA, it is now available to general subscribers. Editor Boggs and associate editor Marion Zimmer Bradley join James E. Gunn, Sam Sackett, Joe Gibson, Damon Knight, Jim Harmon, Virginia Blish and William Atheling, Jr. in an effort they—and their readers —can be justly proud of for the quality and entertainment value offered. The letter column alone (Philip Jose Farmer, James Blish, Damon Knight, Anthony Boucher, Robert W. Lowndes, Richard Eney) has more interest than many 'zines can boast of in their lead-off material. SKYHOOK belongs on any list of the Top Ten, and in any fan's permanent file. I don't know if SKYHOOK is read by Guy Lombardo, Gladys Swarthout and Spring Byington, but I have often seen Bob Tucker move his lips as he squints at the pages.

Something very special is the FRANK KELLY FREAS PORTFOLIO (Advent Publishers, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 13, Ill.: $1.50). Advent, as most fans know, is the firm headed by oldtime fan Early Kemp, which last year brought out Damon Knight's critical essays under the title of IN SEARCH OF WONDER. Now comes this handsome collection of the work of award-winning artist Freas; a careful selection of some of his best illustrations from the prozines. A striking two-color cover and intentionally easy-to-un-

fasten staple-binding contains the superb reproductions on fine paper, each picture being bordered so as to permit removal and framing. In fact, publisher Kemp's sole criterion in making his selections was, "What will it look like in a frame?" An introductory page offers the Freas biography and a photograph. Although this isn't a fanzine, strictly speaking, it's certainly an item of fannish interest, and though $1.50 is more than the usual fanzine price, this folio is surprisingly inexpensive—inasmuch as any art fancier gets a choice of professionally reproduced artwork to hang if he so desires. Everyone connected with this job is to be complimented, including those fans whose good taste will cause them to send for a copy.

ZODIAC No. 3 (Larry Sokol, 4131 Lafayette Avenue, Omaha 31, Neb.: bi-monthly: 10c 6/50c) has a Dan Adkins cover, in case Bill Hamling hasn't noticed. The thing which attracted my eye in this issue, however, was Guy E. Terwilleger's devastating article on science fiction movies offered to television viewers. A very nice piece of work.

THE SCIENCE FICTION YEARBOOK (Fandom House, PO Box 2331, Paterson 23, N.J.: annual: 50c) has just arrived, and deserves special mention. Edited by James V. Taurasi, Sr., and Ray Van Houten, of SCIENCE FICTION TIMES, it represents the fulfilment of a long-cherished ambition to publish a yearly history of the science fiction field. Well-stapled, in a heavy binder, this edition is ready to take its place in the permanent collection of any fan interested in following the annual course of his hobby. The historical events of 1956 are traced by the editors, Frank R. Prieto, Jr., Thomas S. Gardner, Forrest J. Ackerman, Stephen J. Takacs and J. Harry Vincent. In fact, the only contributor without a spare initial is Sam Moskowitz—and he runs away with the issue in a 14-page contribution called SCIENCE FICTION MARKET SURVEY 1956.

The survey, based on statistical tabulations, is just what the title implies, plus a series of interpretations and opinions by the author. The editors believe that this will be "the most talked-about article of the year" and I'm inclined to agree with them; both fans and pros will find an amazing amount of stimulating and provocative material about the prozine field in this contribution. While it is possible to dispute the validity of the figures when projected to apply to the entire field, and even possible to question the complete veracity of some of the individual respondents to the questionnaire, no one can doubt but that Moskowitz has done a terrific job with the data he has assembled. The fun begins when one questions the conclusions he draws from the figures; as no doubt a number of editors and fans will. I personally have gone on record as dissenting from some of his conclusions; but I would also like to go on record as stating that I believe he has done a signal service by taking on this by no means inconsiderable project. His industry and integrity deserve high praise.

—Bob Bloch

Kiley felt all-powerful with the alien guiding him in the looting of a world. Now the whole galaxy was his if he could remember to —

Never Trust A Thief!

by

Ivar Jorgensen

KILEY TOOK ONE LAST, fond look at the glittering heap of jewels in the back of the spaceship, nodded happily to himself, and began to set up a blastoff orbit. Somewhere down on the field far below, he could see dot-like figures - - spaceport attendants, all firmly convinced that this was an authorized flight.

He chuckled. *This is the right way to pull a job,* he thought contentedly. *Hypnotize 'em silly and then walk in and take what you want.*

His fingers skipped lightly over the control panel as he readied the ship for blastoff. For the first time in his life he felt truly happy. Two million stellors of rare gems in the back of the ship, and even after cutting Thaklaru in for his share, that still left a million. A million stellors! Lord, that sounded good!

Well, Kiley, are you going to spend all day dreaming? I'm waiting for you!

The rolling thunder of Thaklaru's voice in Kiley's mind jolted him back to reality. "I'm on my way," he said out loud, knowing that the alien was listening. "I've got the stuff, and I'll be there before you know it."

Good. I'm anxious to see those jewels.

"Don't worry about it, Thaklaru."

I'm not worrying. But I know you'd be quite willing to blast off in the other direction and keep them all for yourself.

Kiley grinned. "Nothing's secret from you, eh, Thaklaru? You don't miss a thing."

I can't afford to, the alien's telepathic voice said. *The first rule in thievery is never to trust an accomplice.*

"That makes sense," Kiley admitted. "Only there's no way I



can escape you - - not when you can telepath anywhere in the galaxy. How do I get to your planet?"

Don't trouble yourself. Simply blast off and I'll assume mental control of your ship once you're out in space. I'd prefer that the location of my world remain a secret even to you.

Kiley shrugged. "Okay. I won't argue. I'm blasting off now."

He jabbed down on the firing stud.

The stolen spaceship sprang up into the void, and Kiley felt the alien's mental emanations enfolding him, seizing control of the ship, guiding it - - just as, a month before, similar emanations had come to him in the darkness of a jail cell in the Under-Dungeon of Alpheraz VII.

They had nailed him for a bungled burglary - - he'd have made it, all right, except that he hadn't foreseen one of the new-model psionic alarms - - and, since he was a four-timer, they'd stuck him in solitary deep in the dank heart of the planet.

The guard, a thick-muscled Alpherazian with three cold, slitted eyes, had hurled him into the cell, thrown him sprawling against the slimy stone.

"That ought to hold you, Kiley!" the Alpherazian growled. "You've stolen your last jewel, Earthman."

"Get out of here!" Kiley said thinly. "Don't stand here and gloat. I'd be free and out of here if that crazy alarm hadn't popped off."

The guard chuckled. "Relax and cool off, Kiley. You've got plenty of time to get used to your new home."

The door clanged shut. Kiley spat in the darkness as he heard the bolt slipping home - - the unbreakable, foolproof bolt of the escape proof Alpheraz jail. And then - -

How would you like to be free in five minutes? a voice asked.

"Huh? Who's there?" Kiley looked around, narrowing his eyes to see in the foggy blackness, but there was no one within sight.

Don't strain your eyes, the voice said - - and Kiley realized it was an unspoken voice in his mind. *I'm a thousand light-years away. The name is Thaklaru.*

"Who are you? *What* are you?"

That doesn't concern you. I need your professional services, and I have a proposition to make.

"Go ahead," Kiley said, mystified.

You're a jewel-thief - - and a good one. I can aid you in such a way that you'll be a perfect one.

"What do you mean?"

How would you like the power of instant hypnosis? the alien asked. *You could go anywhere you liked - - simply by convincing people you belonged there. My mind, projected out through the focus of yours, could do this thing. We could work as partners, and divide fifty-fifty.*

"Hold on," said Kiley suspiciously. "What do you need *me* for, then? If you've got this power, why not just rob whatever you want yourself?"

There was the voiceless equivalent of a chuckle. *I do not like to leave my home world. You will act as my travelling - - ah - - agent.*

"Sounds good to me," Kiley said. "I've got nothing to lose, anyway. But how do I get out of here?"

A simple matter. Just be patient.

Kiley waited. A few minutes later, the Alpherazian jailer showed up - - but the look of scorn was gone from his eyes.

"Dreadfully sorry, Mr. Smith," the guard said humbly. "There's been some mistake here - - we thought you were someone else. Naturally, we'll indemnify you for this inconvenience."

"That's all right," Kiley said casually. "Mistakes *do* happen, you know."

"This way, please. We're terribly sorry about the whole affair."

Kiley smiled as the guard led him out of the cell-block to free-

dom. *You're a man of your word, Thaklaru,* he thought. *It's a deal.*

ONCE FREE, Kiley had spent a very pleasant three weeks on Alpheraz VII. Thaklaru's mind was with him at all times - - and with his power of instant hypnosis, all doors were open to him. It was a simple matter.

The big coup came when Kiley grew tired of the planet's pleasures. He travelled to the Emperor's palace.

The guards bowed to him as he approached. "Good afternoon, your majesty!"

Kiley smiled politely and kept on going. He walked quickly through the palace, stopping only to ask a butler where the jewel-room was.

As it turned out, the Emperor himself was in the jewel-room. "Pardon me, your majesty," Kiley said. "I'll have to have some of these, I'm afraid."

The monarch looked up, met Kiley's eye, and froze. "Of course, he said politely. "Go right ahead." And he stood to one side while Kiley plundered the crown jewels.

From there, he travelled to the spaceport outside the city, where he commandeered a small one-man ship by asking its pilot to leave. Guided by Thaklaru, he arranged for clearance and blasted off.

It had been simple. Terribly, terribly simple - - almost dull, Kiley reflected, as his ship sped through space toward Thaklaru's home world. He wondered idly what his partner-in-crime looked like. A grotesque pulsating slug floating in a bath of some slimy fluid, perhaps? It would have to be something along those lines, Kiley thought - - something that would keep Thaklaru from entering the worlds of the galaxy by himself and taking whatever he pleased.

"We make a good team, Thaklaru," Kiley said aloud.

True, the alien said. *With my power and your agility, we could steal anything the galaxy contained.*

Kiley turned and looked at the heap of jewels again. Two million stellors! Quickly, he computed the value in Earth currency, and gasped. The haul was worth nearly ten billion dollars!

Perspiration broke out all over him. He tried frantically not to think what he was thinking, but there was no way to keep the thoughts from flooding into his mind.

He heard Thaklaru chuckling. *No, Kiley. There's no way you can cheat me of my share of the wealth.*

"Dammit, Thaklaru, do you

have to keep listening to my mind? Can't I have a *little* privacy?"

Don't fear. Kiley. Your reaction is a perfectly understandable one, and I hold no rancor against you for desiring great wealth. I expect you to think that way - - which is why I keep listening to you. I never trust an accomplice, remember.

A new thought entered Kiley's mind. "Say - - what do you *need* these jewels for? Seems to me you could have anything you wanted, money no object - - so why do you want to be rich?"

Rich? I do not want to be rich. The jewels are pretty, though - - and I like beautiful things. I covet them for purely esthetic reasons.

"Okay with me," Kiley said. "I have more practical ends in mind."

It is understandable. Ah - - you are approaching my home world now. Please prepare for deceleration.

AN HOUR LATER, Kiley stood on the soil of Thaklaru's planet and looked around.

Welcome, the alien's voice said.

Kiley stood by the side of his spaceship and stared at the awesome sight. A vast chain of naked mountains sprang up like a row of gigantic teeth to the east - - bare, jagged peaks stretching up into dim immensity, twenty and thirty and forty thousand feet in air. Wild savage-looking vegetation swept fiercely around him, trees well over a thousand feet high and looking to be a block wide at their base. Just at a distance of a few feet, a monstrous cliff reared straight upward toward the swirling black-and-gold clouds. It was a strange and utterly primitive world.

"Okay, I'm here!" Kiley shouted. "Where are you?"

I will be with you soon, the alien responded. *Take the jewels from the ship.*

"How do I decide which are yours and which are mine?"

Take them all. We will decide once they are out of the ship.

A sudden ripple of terror ran through Kiley, turning the little jewel-thief cold. He felt dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of Thaklaru's world. He wondered where the alien was, what sort of creature he might be.

Your curiosity will soon be ended, Thaklaru said. *When you have brought the jewels out, I will appear.*

Kiley shrugged and started to climb the catwalk that led into the ship. There was little sense in trying to argue with Thaklaru's

abilities; if he didn't go willingly, the alien would only force him. He gathered the jewels into a double handful and brought them back outside, dropping them onto a bare patch of reddish-green soil. Returning, he brought the rest of them out.

"Okay," he said. "They're all there."

Good. They are lovely.

"Suppose you show up and let's divide these things," Kiley said. "I'm tired of your mental voice - - let's hear the real thing."

Very well.

A clap of thunder seemed to split the sky - - a deafening, booming noise that made the ground quiver. Kiley cowered in fright as the sound was repated - - and this time, he was able to detect words.

"I am Thaklaru!"

"Where are you?"

"Look upward!" the booming voice cried.

Hesitantly, Kiley turned his gaze upward - - and gasped. The "cliff" he had thought stood next to him was no cliff at all. It was a vast alien creature, stony and terrifying, whose head vanished in the fuzzy clouds far overhead.

Again came the booming noise: "I am Thaklaru!"

"I see why you needed an accomplice," Kiley said in a weak voice. "Something - - someone of your size - - "

"Yes. I could never venture into anything as tiny as one of your cities."

Kiley licked his lips nervously. "Well - - here are the jewels. Let's - - let's divide them!"

"One bit of business first," the alien's thunderous boom came. "You have served well - - but you cannot live."

"What?"

"It is necessary, Kiley. There are ways of extracting information from a man's subconscious - - and I would not have my existence known."

Suddenly the sky was black. Kiley looked up and saw what could only be a foot - - a monstrous, horrible foot - - blotting out the sunlight overhead.

"I warned you, Kiley - - never trust an accomplice. And *I* was your accomplice."

The sky rang with the gigantic alien's cosmic laughter. Kiley covered his ears to blot out the hideous sound. Tears of rage flooded his eyes.

"It's not fair! It's - - "

"Sorry, Kiley."

Like an ant, the thief thought bitterly. *I'm dying like an ant.*

And then the great foot came down.

THE END

Consider an alien infiltrating our world — impossible to catch because he might inhabit any person — even you! You'd likely start screaming —



by

Tom W. Harris

"I HAVE COME to discuss a very grave problem," said the talking-attendant.

"Then let's get down to details," said Chester Forge. "It's urgent you said."

Interviews with Ravians always made Chester nervous. They wouldn't use the psi-control voice sets, and there was something uncanny in talking to a human, a talking-attendant, when you knew it wasn't the man speaking at all, but the alien intelligence he was temporarily host to.

It was even more unsettling when the Ravian was a high official, as at present. Their minds were even more coldly intellectual, dry and logical than the usual Ravian tourist's. And they could make a lot of trouble. Chester's job as tour-chief here at Knoxville—more specifically, Port Knoxville, where the ships came in—was to keep the tourists happy as possible. No, not happy. Happiness is an emotion. Satisfied maybe.

"There are scant useful details I can give you," said Monnn, the Ravian, through the lips of the talking-attendant. "There was a stowaway on the sightseeing ship that came in this morning—one of our people. He is a fugitive. He has left the ship and is here on earth somewhere, perhaps in Knoxville. He must be captured."

Chester Forge was jolted, but he had found you got on better with Ravians if you never showed feelings. He made his voice calm.

"A fugitive, hmmm? What was his crime?"

"The question is immaterial," said Monnn. "So typical of your people. But I suppose you will function better if not bothered by curiosity. Minnn, the stowaway,



told a lie."

"A lie?"

"The worst of crimes. Minnn was a politician, campaigning for office, and he lied in making a promise he could not execute."

By Joe, thought Chester, now I've heard them all. Well, the rule is you never, never question the tastes of an alien. The Martians have a mad passion for hop-toads, the Zarlos like to have things hurt them, the Frin talk all the time and the Rorn don't talk at all, and—

"We'll get him for you," said Chester more firmly than he felt.

"We feel you may fail," said the Ravian. "We ask permission to send our own searchers, no quota on numbers, open-area travel permission."

Chester went white. "I'm afraid we can't grant that. I promise we'll get him for you."

"Why can you not grant that?"

"Well—population. There aren't enough volunteers to host any more than the present quota, and of course you can't get around without hosts."

"How human," said Monnn through the attendant. "You are afraid of us. Yet you know we have no desire at all for this planet, and that we know you know this.

"Why do you lie? On our planet you would be treated as Minnn will be—your personality dismembered, the useful parts assigned to another, the imperfect disposed of."

"Be that as it may," said Chester, a chill in his spine. "We will find this fugitive ourselves."

"Of course. And if you do not, within two of your days, we must come to search ourselves. One more thing—Minnn may turn killer. And now I shall retire—manipulating this organism is most fatiguing."

The talking-attendant stood blank-faced for a moment as the Ravian withdrew to some nook of his mentality. Then he blinked and peered around, discovered he was in Forge's office, and saluted.

"That's okay, John," said Chester. "Thanks. Take him back to his husk."

The attendant left and Chester picked up his visor, punching the button for Security Chief. . .

ON CLINCH STREET, little Sally Odum was walking home from school. She turned down an alley for a shortcut, and there she saw the toy. It was a black, fringed globe, a little larger than a grapefruit. "Gee!" exclaimed Sally, and reached out and grabbed it.

The globe changed from black to gray, from shiny to dull, and from firm to flaccid. Sally felt a little tingle in her fingertips, a tiny

tug in her mind. Looking thoughtful, she slipped the limp toy under her jacket. She trotted home, hid the thing at the botton of her toy box, and promptly forgot about ever finding it.

Minnn, exhausted from the psionic strain of rolling his body through the thick earth air all the way from the port to the city, and then directing the feeling and movement of Sally, made one little adjustment in her memory, then turned off his awareness and rested. In the rich rush of mental currents he would soon be replenished. In the meantime he was safe...

★ ★ ★

The Ravian had given Chester Forge two days to find Minnn. A day had passed and nothing had happened. He had kept things quiet, up to now. There was no indication his quiet search would produce anything. It was time for a different tactic. . .

★ ★ ★

Sally Odum's father looked up from the news-sheets that had just come off the clicker. "Mary, did you see these items about the Ravian loose in the city?"

His wife was playing chack with Sally. The child had beaten her four games running, and Mary was just beginning to wonder if she was mother to a genius. A mother does not appreciate interruption of such musings. "Ah—no," she answered absently. "What about um?"

"Seems this bird—Minn's his tag—is thought to be hiding out in some human around town. He forced."

Mary was more interested. "Isn't forcing against galactic convention?"

"Darn right. This guy's a fugitive. like I said."

"I knew they'd get in trouble, letting these foreigners come down."

"Look, honey. One thing, we need the trade. A Ravian pays four picks of plainum for a day or two in a human. It's all here in the news-sheet. A Ravian hasn't got emotions. and when they're in a host they can feel everything the host feels. Real Kicks. The host gets to spend one pick himself—a small fortune—he has a shivaree and the Ravian goes for the ride. And for the host it's all voluntary."

"What about this Minnn?"

Sally listened with bright attention, slightly flushed.

"It says here he could be anywhere, any man, woman or child. Tells how you can spot 'em and names a reward. Person with old Minnn inside is a little flushed, feverish, doesn't sleep very well. They . . ."

"Say, honey, Sally didn't sleep well last night. Do you think she's all right?"

"Any kid has a restless night sometimes, Mary. Lemme finish. The person is apt to be kind of listless, and might have memory blanks. Oh—and the Ravian enters a host by some kind of physical contact, and he can get to another host only by a contact with the first one."

"Maybe we ought to take Sally to Dr. Price, hon. She just hasn't been herself lately."

"Oh well." sighed Odum, and threw down the clicker-story. "Tell you what. All you do is visor security, tell them you're pretty sure a person has this Ravian, and the person gets a real good physical—free. Let's just tell them Sal has the symptoms and get a deal."

Sally got up listlessly and the screen banged as she wandered out.

"What symptoms?" asked Mary.

"You mean you weren't listening?" And Mr. Odum told Mrs. Odum all the signs the article had listed, while Mrs. Odum gradually paled.

"But—those are exactly the symptoms she does have," she said when he finished. Their eyes met and he reached for the visor.

The security cops arrived. Chester was with them. As they boiled from their 'copter they nearly knocked over an old gentleman who was creaking his way delicately along the sidewalk, and one cop stepped on a small dog, which bit him.

Two of them stayed with Sally, who stood in the yard with a scared expression; two others entered the house with Chester. They all came out of the house and Mary explained to Sally that she was not to be frightened. Sally was given a nice raincoat with built-in mittens—it was triple-ply mento-insulation plastic—and everybody bundled into the 'copter.

Sally liked the ride and the raincoat, but when it was all over she was sad. Mr. Forge seemed disappointed somehow . . .

MINNN LAY QUIET in his new host soaking in data. Perfesser Frye . . . old . . . quiet, jogging complex of contentment. and dissatisfaction. Cheated on price of eggs . . . nice house over there, awful the way they've changed things . . . little girl, patted her on the head, might have had a child like that. Enjoy what you can. Glow-thought connected with something called beer.

Minnn was shocked to find that, almost the opposite of Sally, Perfesser Frye was a complete liar. He was not a professor, and the

knowledge he impressed people with was mostly a collection of long, mispronounced words and memorized facts of which the Perfesser did not know the meaning. His landlady believed he was coming into an immense inheritance based on platinum on Vega, and she allowed him a familiarity which Minnn found amusing and which included rent exemption. The man was a collection of lies. Even his rheumatism was not genuine, but psychosomatic.

That evening the Perfesser had the unpleasant experience of seeing his own face on the landlady's show-visor set, with the information that there was a price on his head. This was the last he remembered for some time, although to the landlady he appeared to retain full consciousness. He leaped to his feet most unrheumatically, tied her up, bashed in the visor, and pattered out into the streets, which were deserted.

The Perfesser had good eyes for distance use, Minnn found. He swung the Perfesser's hook-beaked head about searchingly. At the end of the street men were coming, in mento-insulation. Minnn swung the lanky frame about, almost capsizing it, and sprinted long-leggedly in the opposite direction.

In a few blocks the heart was pounding and the face was hot and the lungs could not suck enough oxygen. The Perfesser was not feeling anything consciously, but his parasympathetic nervous system was giving Minnn the horrors.

The cops could not be seen. Minnn withdrew to rest. The Perfesser came to an abrupt halt, and gazed about him glassily. He remembered the nightmarish moment watching the visor; now he found himself in the street panting like a horse and raining sweat. He stood getting his breath and trying to think, then moved off purposefully . . .

CHESTER'S EYES felt like they would drop out on his desk at any moment. He had had no sleep. He was entertaining a plan to visit the Ravians, in disguse, as a tourist, and make things miserable for *them,* when two buzzers rang at once.

He answered his chief's buzzer first. Had Minnn been caught? No? Well, the governor had called and the heat was on. The chief was forced to give Forge a choice of producing Minnn in 24 hours or being sent as supercargo to the Mars-deserts. That was all.

The second buzzer was Monnn, speaking through a talking-attendant.

"Your two days are up this evening," said the Ravian. "Any progress?"

"We ought to have him any time now."

"Nonsense. Minnn had been in that young girl—I could tell, when she was here."

Forge got little pleasure from his reply. "I know that. We're after the man Minnn moved to."

Monnn was unperturbed. "Good. You have about an hour."

"One thing," said Chester. "You say Minn might kill. Any special way he'd go about it?"

"How should I know?" asked Monnn. "Minnn is an outlaw, under pursuit and away from his planet. On our planet there are no killings." And he hung up . . .

THE PERFESSER, umbrella under his arm, black serge suit dusty, walked down a long alley and into Steve's Beer Bar. Beer, he always figured, was a real help when you were perplexed.

Minnn witnessed this logic with disgust. The Perfesser's memory-units showed the beer just made him more perplexed. But Minnn was resting in witness-state, very tired from making the Perfesser do all that running.

The Perfesser hooked his umbrella over the bar and was waited upon by Steve himself. "You look kinda bushed," said Steve respectfully.

"A man my age must watch himself, Steve. Especially when he is enervated by the hardihoods of lifetime scholarship."

"Rough," said Steve admiringly. He didn't know what the language meant but it sounded gorgeous.

The Perfesser turned to a pushed down man beside him at the bar. "You would hardly believe, friend, what has just happened to me. One moment I was watching a home-visor-view—and the next I was standing in the street. I can scarcely credit this phenonemon."

"Funny things happen," said the pyshed-down man. "I drive a laundry truck, and one stop is out to the national asylum. They got people out there what don't know where they even came from, too."

"You sure this really happened, Perfesser?" said Steve. "I mean—you wouldn't make it up or nothing." The Perfesser had drunk only one "fish bowl" of beer—it was a little early for his star-spangled lying.

"I can aver it happened." said the Perfesser stiffly. "A phenomena of psychic rarity—similar things have occurred to intellectual persons at various points in history."

Minnn was not enjoying himself. Humans were fun when they were having fun, but other moods were unendurable. Coupled with

illogic it was worse. Minnn was considering shifting to the truck-driver when the man suddenly arose. "Well, night, Steve, Perfesser—I gotta get the sheets a-rolling," said the man, and vanished out the back door.

It was seconds later that two policemen burst in the front door and headed straight for the Perfesser. Minnn acted instantly. The Perfesser's awareness was clamped out and the creaking frame was sent speeding to the back door.

Down the alley the laundry truck was starting, and the Perfesser's voice sailed after it "Wait, fellow. Hold on!"

The truck slowed and the wizened face of the driver peered back just in time to see the police burst into the alley and open fire. The face was withdrawn instantly and the truck gained speed.

The Perfesser ran after it, shouting until his breath gave out. There was junk in the alley and it was crisscrossed by other alleys with traffic on them and the driver dared not approach top speed. The cops shot twice again at the Perfesser, who was running like an antelope.

Minnn felt a crash in the Perfesser's shoulder and the tall body swayed. A bit of lead had entered the clavicle. Minnn strained and the ends of the veins constricted, slowing the loss of blood. The Perfesser's heart and lungs were behaving alarmingly but Minnn kept the body running. He was gaining on the truck.

The truck gained speed and so did the Perfesser. Ancient arteries, brittled with deposits, strained and began to give. The Perfesser's arm raised as he drew alongside the truck. The umbrella-tip neared the driver.

A BULLET GRAZED the Perfesser's side—Minnn suddenly realized they were not shooting to kill: and also the shaky frame he had taken would not be able to run much longer. With a surge of concentration he pushed the body forward. The umbrella-tip touched the driver, Minnn drove himself down the metal ferrule, somewhere an artery burst, and the body of the Perfesser sagged, wobbled, and, still carried forward by momentum, smashed into a wall and toppled over. It lay there on its back. Being front-man for a Ravian had been Perfesser Frye's last falsehood.

The truck got out of the alley, going fast, and kept going fast until it came to the asylum. The driver did not go to the back door—there might be people waiting for him. He walked in the front door, up to the receptionist, and

touched her. Then he discovered himself standing there, and walked embarrassedly out again.

The receptionist remained at her desk. A visitor was moving toward her; as he passed, the receptionist touched his hand.

Down a hallway opening into the reception room came a little group of men—three attendants from the hospital and the hospital director; a talking-attendant and Chester Forge, and the truck driver. All were gloved and clad in mento-insulation but the talking attendant.

"I was standing right here," said the driver excitedly. "Right here in front of this desk."

The talking-attendant rested his hand on the receptionist's forehead. "Not there now," he declared.

"Have any of you seen anyone near this desk?" called the director to the room at large. A woman pointed to the visitor the receptionist had touched. "He was!"

The visitor began to run.

"We've got to get him before he gets into a patient!" yelled Chester. "In an unbalanced mind even Monnn can't find him! Get him."

They went plunging after the visitor.

Minnn was pleased. He had a head start, and this human had good running potential. He would have fun. An interne stepped out of a door, the visitor touched his hand, the interne stepped back through the door, rapidly. The searchers swirled down the hall and grabbed the visitor and Monnn made his test. "Not here now," he reported.

The interne strolled into an elevator, went up a story, walked quietly down another corridor. Excitement was percolating through the place almost as though the inmates breathed it. There were many inmates on this floor; he could force into one almost at leisure.

Another elevator jarred to a stop, doors opened, and the searchers bolted out. Chester's face was like a purple plum, his eyes were red and wild. The long chase was teasingly close to ending, and could be frustrated forever.

The interne turned and thumbed his nose at Forge, who gave a bellow of anger. As the men surged toward him, the attendant sprinted a few yards, reached out and touched a patient. The halls were full of them; attracted by the excitement. Unobtrusively the patient touched another, who in turn touched another, who disappeared in the crowd.

"Go back to your rooms," shouted the director of the hospital. "You are impeding a hunt for a

fugitive."

But the patients didn't see any fugitive, and they stayed, and more kept coming.

There was a disconcerting blur of thought-emotion in the patient Minnn was using. The pursuers were the length of the hall away; he caused his host to turn, shriek a bad word, and thumb her nose at them.

They came running, impeded by the crowd. The patient turned a corner, touched another patient, who touched another.

It was quite an experience, Minnn decided. He had whirled through a rich kaleidoscope of minds and emotions; in one woman there had been a fountain of ecstacy he would have to go back and sample sometime. He had come to the perfect place. Except as he chose to do it, to tease, these inmates could not reveal him, and no Ravian could detect him. He could stay here an indefinite length of time—wait them out—then go back to the toy chest where his husk lay—or trace Sally Odum's memory for it in case she had moved it—and repossess himself.

He could learn to live on this planet—perhaps he could even get governmental sanctuary, though that was not essential. He would not be lonely. Ravians do not get lonely. They do, however, have a sense of power.

But the pursuers were coming down the hall, the Ravian in the talking attendant attempting to sort through the twisted minds, the person from the tourist service almost out of his own mind. And though Minnn was having sport, he was a little tired. He turned the eyes of his host toward the group of hunters, and saw that they had stopped coming and stood talking. He walked his host to a window-bench, sat it down, turned its mind toward slumber, and relaxed.

CHESTER HAD to have a plan, and, driven to unwonted efficiency by the threat of bureaucratic disgrace and exile, his mind began to form one. The plan was not without its dangers, especially to Chester, but it was the only plan they had.

Power was shut off to all elevators, and at the flip of a switch all the doors on the group's floor were locked. "We've got him penned on this floor," said Chester. "I only hope he doesn't come across a mouse."

"He's probably on this floor," corrected Monnn through the talking attendant. "And he'll *probably* stay. Ravians have a slight psionic control, as you know, and it's barely possible Minnn could force him-

self through a door-panel."

"How about a wall?"

"I doubt it."

"What if there was nobody on the other side for him to force into?"

"He would not last very long . . . we would lose him. And that would go hard for you, Mr. Forge, because we do not want Minnn done away with, we want him captured."

"I don't need to be reminded," said Chester, mentally getting a two-handed hold on the always-be-polite-to-a-tourist rule. "And now let's smoke him out."

The director and a helper lingered unobtrusively near a firehose; the rest of the group strolled on down the hall. Minnn had rested and was alert again. Through his host-eyes he saw there were many patients milling about—there were so many ready refuges. It occurred to him that he had not particularily bedeviled his countryman, and he caused his host to pick up a vase and hurl it at the head of Monnn's talking-attendant.

Almost instantly a blast of chill water struck Minnn's host, knocking her sprawling. Minnn found her emotions most unpleasant. He took her mind fully, forcing her up from the floor, and a ram of water pounded her down again. Somebody was rounding up the other patients, pushing them out of his reach. People were yelling, running.

Somebody down the hall aimed a wide-nozzled gun at Minnn's host. There was also the blat of an explosion and something hit his host in the chest. "What poor weapons," thought Minnn, and then the thing exploded. A thick gas swaddled the host-patient, Minnn felt the body sagging. There was no time for him to weigh all factors for a really logical decision, and he made a snap-judgment to leave this body before it lost consciousness and sealed off his contact with his environment.

A form was stumbling past, and Minnn reached his host's hand up and touched it. In a flash he had entered. Almost instantaneously he realized that this time it was different. The nervous system was alive with wild, determined resistance.

His host was Chester Forge.

Chester reeled back from the gas-shroude, drowsing inmate. The gas would stay near her, held by the biostatic charge in all its particles. He had to keep away from it; he needed all his consciousness for his battle.

He would never be able to quite describe many of the things he felt during the struggle he waged within his own organism like a civil war. Minnn had entered at

his right wrist. Although Chester had mentally braced, the alien had surged up his arm almost instantaneously, nearly to the shoulder. Chester called on his mind to hold Minnn there. He worked some part of his mind to hold Minnn there. He worked some part of his mind like a new muscle—one cannot explain how it is he works a muscle, he just does it. Simultaneously Chester reeled down the hall toward where Monnn, in the talking-attendant, stood by an open door. Monn and the door were his two aces in the hole.

His flesh crawled; the alien was digging, seeping, sparking through him, along his nerves, like a fluid, a worm, a gas, an insidious writhing electricity. And the alien was winning. Inexorably he drove along the stubborn channels to the seat of control, the watchroom in the skull.

The talking-attendant stood with a rustling, limp black sac out-held —Minnn's husk, taken from the toy-chest of Sally Odum. If Chester could force the writhing Minnn back down and out of his fingertips and into the husk . . .

But he couldn't. The sweat rolled down his face as the fight went on inside him. He had no way of knowing what would happen when Minnn, who was nearing it, reached his brain. Insanity? Convulsions? Death? At the very least, Minnn would control him, and also know his thoughts, his plan, his two aces in the hole.

THERE WAS A TWIST and a tingle at the base of his skull —the invader was entering his brainstalk. It was time to play his first ace. With a burst of determination to control his reeling motor functions, Chester reached out his hand and touched the hand of the talking-attendant. Monnn swished vengefully inside him.

When they had discussed this the others had been afraid. So had Chester. Two alien forces, one hostile, both struggling, might rip and rupture his psychic system like lightning bolts battling inside a transitor. But Chester Forge was a stubborn man, with perhaps a bureaucratic stubbornness, certainly a human stubbornness, and he was committed to an end to be achieved.

For a few split seconds there was in Chester's nervous system what might be described as a "hush." He took advantage of it to step through the open door into a dimly-lighted room. The hospital director, insulation-swathed, followed with the leather-rustling husk.

Then Minnn and Monnn locked forces, and Chester reeled with the

shock and swirl of the combat. The two forces mixed, fused, separated, mingled, yet Chester somehow knew always which was which, got bursts of the reasoning of each, knew in some indescribable way the alien, indecipherable natures of each of them. For an instant he panicked. Something mysterious and terrible as the dark energy of infinity was pounding and flashing in his merely human synapses and cells, something he understood yet could not understand at all.

He felt a draining, and knew Minnn was tapping him for energy. Chester rallied to help Monnn. He pulled his energy, his thoughts, away from Minnn, rolling up, balling, clenching his powers, keeping them out of reach, probing for a chance to strike. Minnn filamented through half his body; part of the alien was needling and darting into Chester's mind, burrowing toward knowledge of his plan. Chester buried his plan in the very center of the ball of thoughts, hiding his last ace.

He could not keep this up much longer, and he could feel that both Minnn and Monnn knew this. It was time for the big assault. He sent flash after flash of willpower crisping through his nerves, and Monnn interwove himself in these assaults. Minnn was being forced back, and back, intolerably pressured.

Minnn hurled his energies at them in a sudden rush, and Chester felt something in him begin to tear like a piece of silk.

Concealed from Minnn like the kernal of a nut, Chester cupped the knowledge, his last ace. He was at the verge of cracking, now was the time to play it. He edged toward the wall of the room, where a patient sat darkly on a bench. At the same time both he and Monnn drove forth their last few ergs of pressure against Minnn.

Chester felt something raise his arm. His arm moved toward the patient; his palm touched the man's cheek. There was a sudden cleanness in him, and Minnn was gone.

He leaped backward through the door and it swung to and locked. A peep-panel was opened in it and the black fringed husk hung up before the opening. Chester touched the talking-attendant so Monnn could pass over, then leaned weakly against the wall opposite the door.

"I give him half an hour," he said. "Who's got a drink of water?"

It turned out that they had waited only twenty-two minutes when the fringed sac began to take a luster, to puff and to fill. When they were quite sure Minnn was

entirely within it, they wrapped it tightly in the insulation and took it away.

"It was a good plan," said Monnn through the talking-attendant as they drove back toward the town. "We could never have forced him to leave you to enter his husk —his logic would have driven him to fight even harder and to stay, with rather unfortunate results to you, Mr. Forge, but under pressure he would leave to enter another host. And it was lucky the walls of that room held him—as you said, that was a gamble we had to take. But I wish you would again describe to me the phenomenom in that room. It sounds quite strange."

"It's something that happens to humans," said Chester, "and I knew no Ravian could put up with it. Illogic disturbs you, and you tour in human beings only for the sake of one kind of emotion, the pleasant kind. In that room there was no logic, and the emotions were of a different kind, a kind you haven't heard of. The humans there were in what is called a depressive ward. They are illogically unhappy, all the time."

"I see," said Monnn through the lips of the attendant. "You have good logic, Mr. Forge. I have a new respect for human logic. Yes."

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF IMAGINATION, published bi-monthly at Evanston, Ill., for February, 1958.

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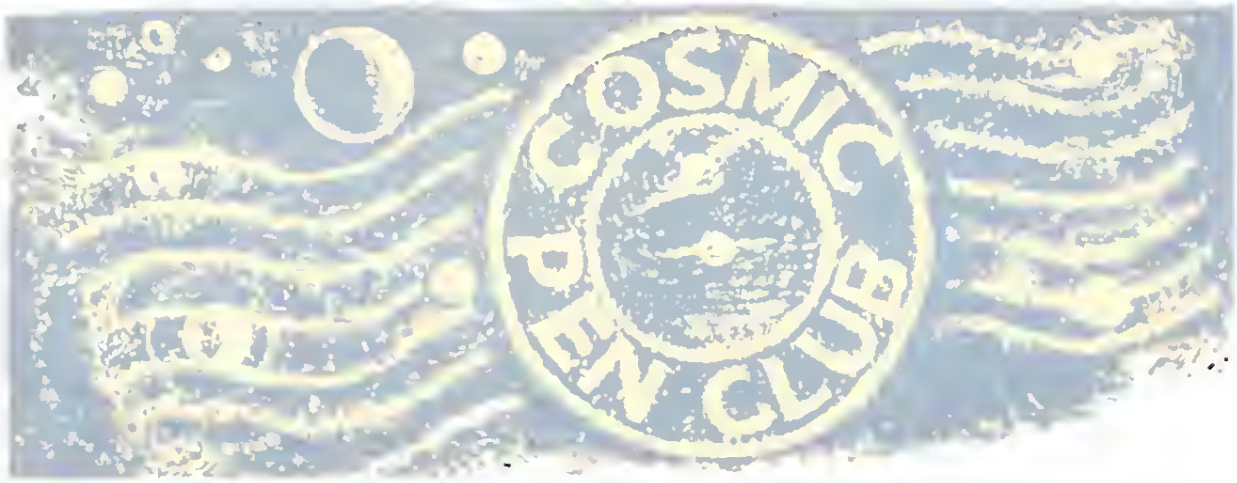
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WILLIAM L. HAMLING, Editor

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1957.
(SEAL)

/s/ W. A. PELZ

My Commission Expires May 27, 1960.



A department for all our readers throughout the world; here you can meet new friends who are interested in the same things you are. Listings are free, so send in yours today!

TECHNICIAN

Glenn Godwin: P.O. Box 368, Binghampton, N.Y.

Age: 38: "I'm single, an electronics technician interested in time travel, creative writing, ham radio, classical music, coin collecting, and handwriting analysis. Will answer all letters."

STUDENT

John Saseen: 1317 Eoff St., Wheeling, West Va.

Age 14: "I'm a science fiction fan, interested in chemistry, stamp collecting and rocketry. Would like to hear from other readers my age."

TELEPHONE OPERATOR

Helen Nov: 99 Winthrop Dr., Akron 19, Ohio.

Age 20: "I'm single, a long distance telephone operator. I'm interested in science fiction, astronomy, chess, ESP, and all related subjects. Also like swimming, and popular music."

STUDENT

Stony Brook Barnes: Rt. 1, Box 1102, Grants Pass, Ore.

Age 15: "I'm a collector of old 'pulp' type magazines, s-f included. Would like to reach others who collect. Am also an amateur cartoonist."

GRADUATE STUDENT

Fred Galvin: 840 Algonquin Ave., St. Paul 6, Minn.

Age 21: "I'm a grad student in math. My interests besides s-f are chess (especially unorthodox varieties of the game) and Kriegspiel. Would like to hear from anyone interested in playing unorthodox chess

or Kriegspiel by mail."

STUDENT

Dick Pratt: 1021 Dodd St., Napoleon, Ohio.

Age 14: "I'm a high school freshman, interested in all fields of science, particularly astronomy. Would like to write to other s-f fans."

SHUT-IN

Donald A. Thompson: RR 2, Box 93, Muncie, Ind.

Age 20: "I'm confined to an iron lung, but have a companion to do my letter writing for me. I'm interested in ESP, psychic phenomena, ancient history, UFO, stamp collecting, and most anything that's unusual. Would appreciate hearing from s-f fans."

STUDENT

Stephen Sala: Box 1, Osburn, Idaho.

Age 16: "I'm interested in ham radio, astronomy, and s-f. Would like to hear from others to exchange ideas on flying saucers, Atlantis, etc. Also like to play chess by mail. Am taking astronomy in college, and also have a tape recorder to use in corresponding."

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Don Johnson: 1350 University Ave., Bronx 52, N.Y.

Age 19: "I'm assistant to the City Editor of the *Newark Star-Ledger*. My hobbies include tennis, horseback riding, swimming, dancing, and skating. I'm also studying at Columbia University and would appreciate hearing from others, particularly in my area."

SWEDISH STUDENT

Rieka Dalmuldes: Lovlundsvagen 50 B, Nynashamm, Sweden.

Age 16: "I'm an s-f femme fan here in Sweden. I'd like to hear from American boys and girls my age. Besides s-f, my interests include dancing, films, and recordings—lots of rock 'n roll."

HOUSEWIFE

Laura McElroy: 17613 Baltar St., Northridge, Calif.

Age 25: "I'm a housewife, mother of 3 children. I used to do photo-lab work, now print my own pictures at home. I like gardening, horses, and most of all—flying saucers!"

STUDENT

David Locke: P.O. Box 207, Indian Lake, N.Y.

Age 13: "I'm an s-f enthusiast, also interested in astronomy, swimming and oceanography. Am quite interested in theories concerning Light. Hope to hear from other fans similarly interested."

CANADIAN STUDENT

Bob Bidwell: Ganges, B.C., Canada.

Age 18: "I'm studying electronics in school, with hobbies including s-f, photography, flying saucers, and collecting 'different' recordings. I hope to hear from others."

STUDENT

Harry Lee Witherspoon: 314 Mill St., Williamsburg, Ky.

Age 17: "I'm a high school student, s-f fan, with interests includ-

ing astronomy, UFO, and in particular flying saucers."

SWEDISH FAN

Per-Ake Lindgren: Box 27, Orsundsbro, Sweden.

Age 13: "I'm an s-f fan in Sweden, anxious to contact letterfriends in America. My main hobby is books and stamps."

STUDENT

Ann Thomas: 1624 Madison Ave., Huntington, West Va.

Age 15: "I'm a sophomore, interested in all sports, particularly baseball and swimming. Am studying fashion art. Enjoy reading and art."

CANADIAN FAN

Michael B. Clivinsky: 79 Eaton St., Elmwood, Winnipeg, Man., Canada.

Age 30: "I'm interested in photography movies & TV, sculpturing, and comic strip writing. Am single, and hope to hear from others."

STUDENT

Harry Thomas: 310 South Oak St., Sweetwater, Tenn.

Age 16: "I'm a junior in high school, with only one principal hobby—collecting science fiction magazines. Particularly fond of Edmond Hamilton's work. Would like to hear from other fan collectors."

STUDENT

Paulette Balogh: 302 West 15th Ave., Homestead, Pa.

Age 13: "I'm interested in corresponding with others on science, chemistry, and stamp collecting. Am a freshman in high school."

ARMY SERVICE WOMAN

Sgt. Louisa Z. Chainey: Registrar Section, DeWitt Army Hospital, Ft. Belvoir, Va.

Age 55: "I'm a widow, and have been in the Service 12½ years. Have been an s-f fan since '52 when I returned from a tour of duty in Germany. Am interested in time travel, telepathy & longevity, and space satellites. Am a student of intuition and would like to hear from others."

STUDENT

George H. Wagner, Jr.: 39 Wilbers Lane, Ft. Thomas, Ky.

Age 15: "I am very, very interested in science fiction. Have been so since 1955. Would like to get in touch with other fans."

STUDENT

David Wasson: 1501 4th Ave., NW, Great Falls, Mont.

Age 15: "I'm a sophomore, very interested in science, flying saucers, and metaphysics. Would like to hear from others in my age bracket."

STUDENT

Nancy L. Parker: 3929 Charlemagne, Long Beach 8, Cal.

Age 15: "I'm a high school sophomore. My interests in s-f include extraterrestrial life, ESP, flying saucers and interplanetary travel. Hope for a doctorate in science. Like swimming, tennis, and dancing."

—In sending your listing, include name, address, age, occupation, and general interests. .....Editor



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE DEEP RANGE

by Arthur C. Clarke, $3.95, 238 *pages, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, N.Y.*

Mr. Clarke's experiences in exploring the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia, described so excitingly in his recent "The Coast of Coral", have provided more grist for his superbly imaginative mill. "The Deep Range" is science-fiction, the story of deep-sea whale-herding and plankton farming set seventy-five years in the future, but related so plausibly that it might now be happening.

Clarke and Heinlein share the unique faculty of making the settings and backgrounds for their tales extraordinarily believable, and of the two Clarke may be tops.

Walter Franklin, Clarke's human hero, an ex-hero rocketeer, finds himself forced to take the prosaic job of whale-warden, riding herd on flocks of food-providing whales. The opportunity this gives Clarke to display the miraculous wonders of ocean life is taken advantage of, and as in all Clarke stories, the believable people are never subordinated to the wealth of imaginative description of gadgetry he is so capable of.

I recommend this book without reservation. If you have never read any Clarke before (and that is hardly believable!) introduce yourself to him with this one.

Clarke's interplanetary stories have been marvelous, far superior to anything done by anyone else in the field. With this Earth-bound tale, Clarke establishes himself as the best in s-f . . .



REVITALIZED

2254 Tecumseh St.,
Baton Rouge, La.

Dear Bill Hamling:

To me your October issue was so good it's helped your competition! Recently I'd been losing interest in science fiction. I wouldn't even have gotten your October number if I hadn't had a subscription . . . Anyway, after reading it I realized what I'd been missing, so I started buying *Amazing*, *If*, etc. Even *Madge* can't fill my renewed appetite for s-f now!

Dwight Swain was good, but his YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY wasn't up to BRING BACK MY BRAIN (April '57) or BATTLE OUT OF TIME (August '57). JOHN HOLDER'S WEAPON, THE MANNION COURT-MARTIAL, and BARNSTORMER were above average. I was surprised and delighted to see your best writer, Alexander Blade, come up with a short story, THE AMBASSADOR'S PET. Here's one yarn not many fans will have guessed the ending for. More Blade, and Hamilton, and less Swain.

Butch Darby

Nothing like Madge for a good s-f shot in the arm! More Blade and Hamilton coming up .....wlh

LET'S SOMEBODY FIGHT

Dear Bill:

For the first time in 7 issues MADGE had a good cover. Your covers, up to the October issue tended too much on the orange-red tint, and, as was this one, were always symbolic.

Your lead novels, up to and including YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY, have been corny, overdone, pseudo-space-opera. I like my space-opera, but this isn't good SO. Oh well, the shorts are always good.

I have been reading MADGE since its inception back in '50 and the letter columns have always been the best part of the magazine. That is, they were up to about three years ago when the stories got better and the letters more and more uninteresting. There are few letter writers who do anything but rate the stories. There have been

no good controversies since the Bott-Asimov fight, and the Satellite argument of a few years ago. I realize that perhaps this is due to non-writers such as myself, so let's write—everyone! Gladiators arise!

Peter L. Bouvier
6958 Amestoy St.,
Van Nuys, Cal.

Whatcha mean, our covers are always symbolic? Tain't so . . . like this issue, f'rinstance. So, ok, let's get a discussion going. Who'll be first? .....wlh

REASON ENOUGH

Dear Bill Hamling:

I want to tell you why I always buy MADGE before I browse around to see what other s-f magazines are on sale.

I like your CARTOONS!

They alone are worth the price of the magazine. Let's face it—the stands are full of s-f, but none of the others offer cartoons of such high quality. Keep up the good work!

Glenn Godwin
Box 368
Binghampton, N.Y.

You're right—and we will! .....wlh

MADGEICAL YARNS

Dear Bill Hamling:

Stories concerning immortality generally bore me and I didn't expect Swain's yarn in the October issue to be an exception. Guess I'll have to admit I erred on my prejudgment of YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY! It was certainly something different in a perpetual-lifer.

Rest of the stories and all the departments were up to *Madge's* high standards—even Silverberg turned in a credible short! Blade's THE AMBASSADOR'S PET was technically the best of the yarns, but JOHN HOLDER'S WEAPON was certainly the most interesting.

One last word. You claim in *Madge* that the stories have a "sense of wonder" and I think I can agree with you without extensive reservations. However, why use a lengthy and common phrase for such an amazing characteristic? Instead of "sense of wonder" make it MADGEICAL!

Joseph B. J. Rice
18 Rosemont Dr.,
Plainville, Conn.

Neatly coined, Joe. Think we'll adopt it from now on .....wlh

WE DIG YOU

Dear wlh:

Madge is a success in that it reaches the public. That it cannot be condemned completely as something without any "reader value" is obvious to me, a reader. Yet, I cannot say your fiction is as thought-provoking and/or as stimulating as most of the yarns appearing in your competitors' books. Yet, *Madge* has a distinct advantage over them. The advantage being your features; features particularly such as FANDORA'S BOX, COSMIC PEN CLUB, and your letter column.

These features offer *communication* among readers.

Without communication s-f would be dead. No one reads simply because he likes to read. He hopes to extract something useful or interesting from what he reads. So, when I buy my issue of *Madge*, I read the departments first. Then

and only then do I start a story. If, in that particular issue, I think the stories smell, so what? I've communicated and can feel I've had my money's worth. Too, your cartoons make me laugh, and when you laugh you're happy. What more can 35c buy you?

Lucky Comunale
25-54 38th St.,
Long Island City 3, N.Y.

You've got something there, Lucky. The only thing more 35c *can buy you is our companion magazine, IMAGINATIVE TALES—where the communication is just as good! .....wlh*

CHARGE TO THE CORNER!

Dear Uncle Bill:

This is the first literary gem I have sent your way although I have been an avid reader of *Madge* and *Tales* for two years now.

Every month when either *Madge* or *Tales* hits the stands I charge to the corner drugstore to snatch up my copy. Finally I have seen the error of my ways and I've decided to let the mailman do the charging—to my front door. So here's my sub.

Your October issue was not as good as usual. Two of your space opera sagas did stand out—YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY! and THE AMBASSADOR'S PET. The remaining stories, however, were not fit for a first grade reader.

The illos, especially the cover, cartoons, and departments were good as usual, though in the cartooning Scheffy appeared to have an off month.

Finally, for the part that will have other readers on my back, I don't care for Bloch's FANDORA'S BOX. In all the time I've read *Madge* I can't seem to get interested in this feature.

Despite my gripes, *Madge* is tops 9 out of 10 times.

Barry McGough
14 Cordone Dr.,
San Anselmo, Cal.

We'll take that kind of batting average every time! .....wlh

WELCOME STRANGER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

When I saw your October issue on the stands here I thought it was a newcomer; but then reading your editorial I found that it was only new to this area.

I enjoyed all the stories and if they are an indication of things to come all I can say is—why haven't we had this wider distribution before?

Enclosed, my subscription!

M. J. Anderson
3029 Tarpey
Texas City, Texas

We've been asking ourselves the same question! Anyway, we found you, and that's the important thing .....wlh

CAN'T FIND US ON SALE

Dear Bill:

Received the October ish of *Madge* today. But have a gripe.

Madge is not available in this neck of the woods. The only place I can buy it is at a news company or the bus terminal. And no *Imaginative Tales* available either. This is a crime!

Stories: THE AMBASSADOR'S PET is No. 1 so far. Haven't finished the novel yet. Liked the rest

of the shorts. Bloch's FANDORA'S BOX was funny as usual. COSMIC PEN CLUB still pleases me—but what happened to the battles in the letter department?

Have started collecting s-f mags now so my sub will be late—but you'll get it!

Vince Roach
R.R. #9, Box 220-N2
Indianapolis 19, Ind.

Your comment on MADGE and TALES being hard to find interests us very much. We'd like to be quite serious for a moment and ask every reader to help science fiction out—not just our two magazines, but the entire field. The big problem today is getting adequate distribution in every area in the country. PLEASE—we repeat—PLEASE ask for your favorite magazines (even ones you may not care for) at every newsdealer you visit if you do not see the magazines displayed on the racks. Many wholesale agencies are treating science fiction in an off-handed manner and as a result the books do not go on sale—or if they do they load a few newsstands instead of spreading the copies around town. This is a situation we editors cannot control—only our readers on the local level can correct this. By repeatedly asking for science fiction, dealers will be forced to order and the wholesalers deliver. Why is this important to you? Believe us—as Horace Gold commented recently in his GALAXY editorial on the same subject— magazines can afford to publish only if sales are adequate, and if distribution is poor you lose sales. Where you don't go on sale you don't sell. It's that simple. We honestly believe you who are reading these words should help science fiction. If distribution gets too poor there won't be any to ask for! .....wlh

LIKES 'EM RIP ROARING

Dear Bill Hamling:

I would like to know why some people criticize s-f. You'll find a lot of people who are so-called fans criticizing *Madge*. But if they dislike it so much why do they buy it? They must find it good subconsciously because they have so little consciously to think with.

I enjoy the brand of s-f in *Madge* and *Tales* because you feature rip-roaring stories. I think your two books are keeping the adventure s-f story alive, and this pleases me

NEW MOLD-PRODUCED CHEMICAL FOR FALLING HAIR

"This hair formula has actually stopped falling hair and has grown full new hair on bald and balding heads, say many, but not all of my clients. I and doctors with whom I have discussed it believe that the activating ingredients were produced by nature. In 1950, the 15th year of my experiments, a solution in my laboratory produced a culture of air borne mold similar to those which produce penicillin and other antibiotics. 'To my amazement this formula completely eliminated dandruff and itchy scalp and grew hair where it has long been balding," writes one user. My formula and scalp treatment involve no oils, heat or odor. Application and morning hair combing may be done at the same time. My treatment cost $10 postpaid for an 8 week supply with instructions. If you prefer to read more about this formula, send your name and address for absolutely free information. I believe that my formula in some way assists nature in restimulating growth of hair. I hope you will experience the happy results that so many of my clients have written and shown me."

WALTER FIELD Dept. 35
6399 Wilshire Blvd. Los Angeles 48, Calif.

very much.

In the October issue I liked all the yarns, especially THE AMBASSADOR'S PET.

Another thing I like about *Madge* is your attitude toward fandom. Most mags don't mention a thing of what's happening in fandom. To see what's going on with fanzines or fan activities, one looks in *Madge* or *Tales*. This I am also glad to see.

Dale Spady
6541 Lenard Dr.,
Castro Valley, Cal.

Interesting that you should mention our friendly attitude toward "active" fandom. Guess it's really part of our attempt to "communicate" as Lucky Comunale commented on earlier. Irony is that fandom (active fandom) looks down on our books. Wouldn't even mention them in the same breath with Galaxy, Astounding, or F & SF. Not that we give a hoot, but it is funny that the only place fandom really finds an open door they pass by with the proverbial sneer. Truth is, they never had it so good! .....wlh

RUMMAGE BONANZA

Dear Bill Hamling:

A couple of months ago while I was rummaging around in my cellar, I discovered a stack of unknown (to me) s-f magaines called IMAGINATION. Well, since I read any kind of s-f I gave your mags a try. Needless to say, I had discovered a bonanza. Out of 24 issues only one was not up to your astronomical standard. Now my only trouble is getting my paws on your new issues locally. Finally hounded down a copy of the October issue after several weeks of looking at various stands. Looks like a subscription is in order to guarantee my supply.

I enjoyed YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY! Swain is great in my book. JOHN HOLDER'S WEAPON, OVERLORD OF COLONY EIGHT, and THE AMBASSADOR'S PET were all good. BARNSTORMER and MANNION COURT-MARTIAL just fair.

I enjoy your cartoons, particularly Scheffy's Hairy Worm.

Alfred Wasick
6007 Park Heights Ave.,
Baltimore 15, Md.

Once again the complaint that s-f is hard to find. Again we stress, ASK FOR SCIENCE FICTION! . . . Say, pal, that was some cellar you dug into. Better look a bit further and maybe you'll come up with copies of IMAGINATIVE TALES too. As good as MADGE .....wlh

DOING IT JUSTICE

Dear Bill Hamling:

Just to say the October issue of *Madge* was good wouldn't do it justice. It was one of your best.

The two best stories in the issue were YOU CAN'T BUY ETERNITY! and THE AMBASSADOR'S PET. The others followed close behind, and the departments were good as usual.

If you keep up this good work who can complain?

Helen Noe
99 Winthrop Dr.,
Akron 19, Ohio

Not us, Helen! See you next issue, gang .....wlh

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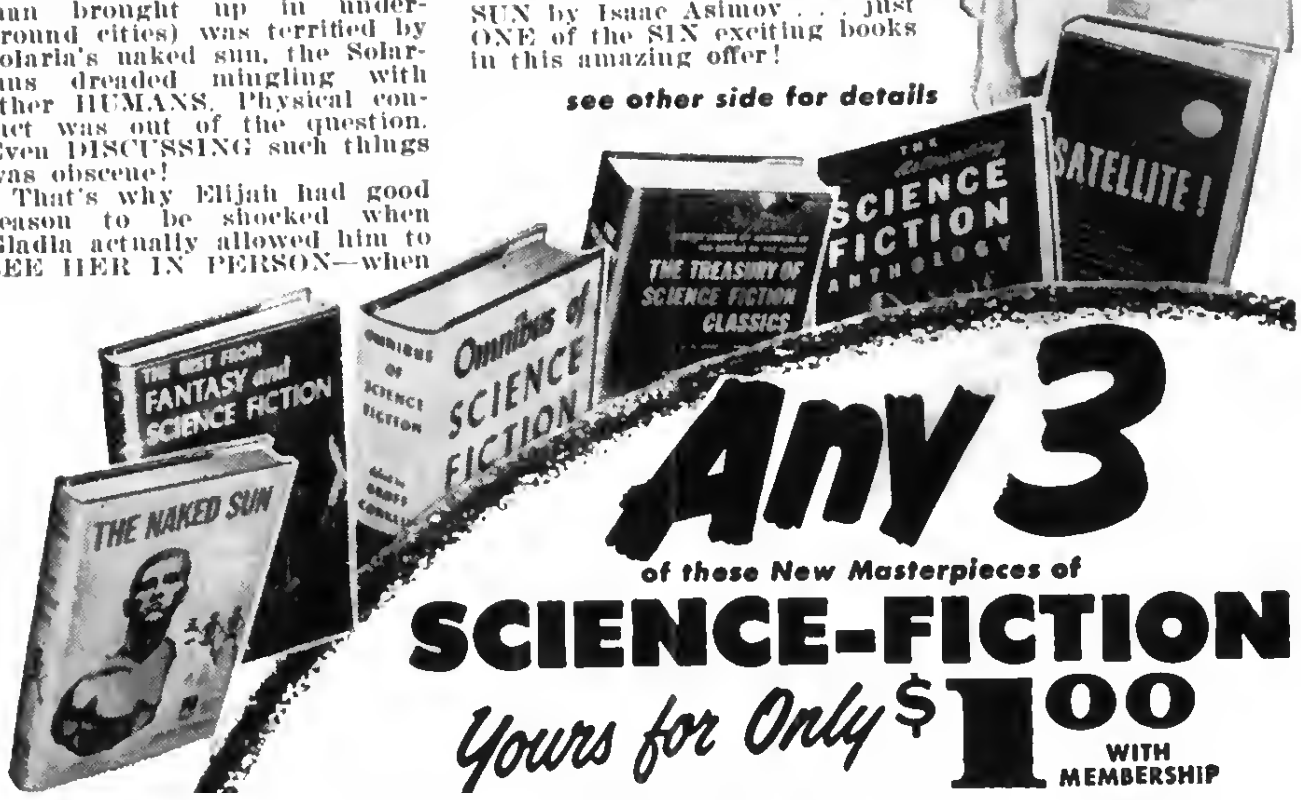
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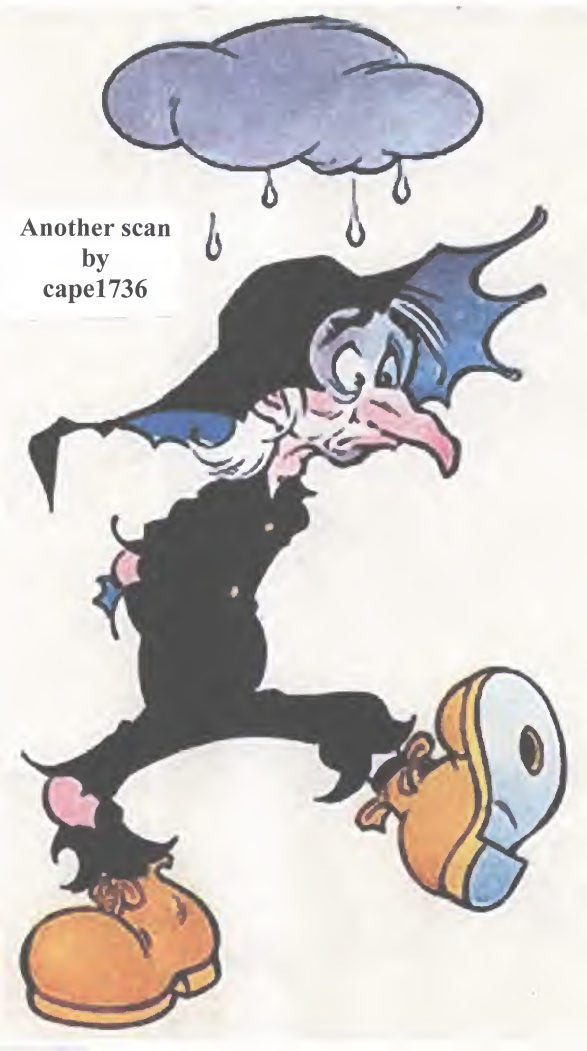
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